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**An Openness Towards the Other:  
Paradox, Aphorism and Desire in the Writings  
of Novalis and Derrida**

**Ph.D.**

**The University of Edinburgh**

**2006**



**I declare that I have composed this thesis, that the work it embodies is my own and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.**



## **Abstract**

This study is a comparative reading of the texts of Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) and Jacques Derrida. The main focus is on the importance Novalis and Derrida accord to paradox and on the role of the Other in their texts. The introduction considers questions of reading and misreading, and examines the ways in which both writers seek to complicate oppositional thinking, concluding that this is the key to wide variations in the reception of their works. Chapter 1 deals with the philosophy of consciousness and the paradoxical status of the absolute or the absolutely-other ('tout-autre'). The second chapter examines the opposition between philosophical and literary writing, and the emergence of 'literary theory' in the era of German Romanticism. Chapter 3 focuses on literature, and the ways in which it subverts notions of representation and totality, through the strategies of nonclosure, fragmentation and self-referentiality. The final chapter looks at similarities in the way Novalis and Derrida articulate the interrelation between separation, language and desire, and compares their ways of describing the structures through which we relate to other people in love and friendship. Building on recent investigations into the modernity of early German Romanticism, the aim of the study is not simply to apply poststructuralist theory to an early Romantic writer, but rather to provide close readings of selected texts in order to identify affinities between Novalis and Derrida. As well as respect for alterity and affirmation of paradox, there are remarkable similarities in their perspectives on philosophy, literature and representation, and on the interrelation between language, identity and desire.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the A.H.R.C. for the three-year research grant which enabled me to write this thesis and to the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, as well as the University of Freiburg, for allowing me to use their libraries.

Heartfelt thanks to my supervisors, Peter Dayan and Howard Gaskill, for their guidance, encouragement and, especially, for their time. Thanks also to Fiona Carmichael and Barbara Brown, for their expertise and patience. I want to thank Brigid Kennedy and the rest of my family, as well as David and Dorothy Crystal, for their constant encouragement and support. Finally, many thanks to Mark Taplin for being not only a careful reader but also a generous and enthusiastic critic.

## Introduction

## Readings and Misreadings

### Returning to Romanticism

Over the last thirty years or so, European Romanticism has been subject to an extensive critical reappraisal. Much attention has been focused on early German Romanticism and, in particular, on the works of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel. In general, this criticism can be said to be a re-evaluation of the ‘modernity’ of Romantic thought. Developments in twentieth-century literary theory – in particular, those associated with the name of poststructuralism – have not only provided critics with a new framework and fresh critical vocabulary for considering Romanticism but have also paved the way to new insights into the Romantics’ own thinking on language, identity and literature. Some critics, such as Andrew Bowie and Manfred Frank,<sup>1</sup> are engaged in rewriting the history of the phenomenon we have come to call ‘literary theory’ and pointing out that its origins are to be found not only in Saussurean linguistics but also in the age of Romantic reflection ushered in by Kant.

I would like to narrow the field considerably by limiting my comparative study to just two thinkers: Novalis, as a representative of Romanticism, and Derrida, as a representative of poststructuralism. Strictly speaking, though, it is not a question of considering these authors as ‘representative’ of wider movements. In many ways,

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<sup>1</sup> See Manfred Frank, *Das Problem ‘Zeit’ in der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung* (München: Winkler, 1972) and Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

they stand outside their respective movements, and undoubtedly one of the most important similarities between them is the difficulty they present to any attempts at categorization. As we will see, especially in Chapter 2, the question of definitions and the naming of concepts is a particular concern of both Romantic and poststructuralist theory. However, I feel that a detailed comparison of Derrida and Novalis will provide a contribution to the wider debate on Romanticism's relationship to modern theory as well as to our understanding of modernity and postmodernity. It will, therefore, be important at times to place both writers in the more general context of literary theory.

I am going to begin by surveying some of the critical literature concerned with the modernity of early German Romanticism. Concepts such as nonclosure,<sup>2</sup> allegory, irony, and 'the de-mystified self'<sup>3</sup> have shaped several revisionist investigations of Romantic theory and practice. It is now becoming something of a critical commonplace for fleeting parallels to be drawn between Romantic theory and poststructuralist theory, and sometimes specifically between Novalis and Derrida. For instance, Margaret Mahony Stoljar, in her introduction to a translation of some of Novalis's philosophical writings, tells us:

For contemporary readers [...] Novalis's writings can seem uncannily pertinent. They address issues that in recent years have continued to expand the parameters of our thinking on truth and objectivity, language and mind, symbol and representation, reason and the imagination. In form and style, too, Novalis's manuscripts demonstrate the associative fluidity of thought characteristic of Nietzsche. They proceed by intuitive and imaginative

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<sup>2</sup> See Alice A. Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> See Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1971, 1983), pp.187-228.

reasoning, rather than sustained systematic argument, in a manner that has become familiar in the writings of Derrida and others of our time.<sup>4</sup>

So there is certainly a consensus that the theory of the early German Romantics shares many of the features of poststructuralist theory. However, critics are far from agreement about the *extent* to which certain aspects of early Romantic theory can be regarded as postmodern or, indeed, whether Romanticism can rightly be regarded as a forerunner of postmodernism or poststructuralism.<sup>5</sup> And it is over this question that a discernible split in opinion emerges. Often, comparisons with poststructuralist theory are followed by qualifying statements which tend to play down – even refute – the modernity of the Romantics. Nicholas Saul, in a discussion of Romantic irony, concedes that ‘many see early Romanticism as postmodernism *avant la lettre*’ but adds immediately that ‘it is wrong to ascribe the postmodern sense of metaphysical void to the yearning for metaphysical plenitude which Romantic irony connotes’.<sup>6</sup> I cite Saul here because his remark gets right to the core of the matter. It is this opposition of ‘metaphysical void’ and ‘yearning for metaphysical plenitude’ which I want to look at more closely. Saul’s formulation implies that the postmodern awareness of metaphysical void is totally incompatible with a so-called longing for metaphysical plenitude. I describe this drawing of a clear distinction as an ‘either/or

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Mahony Stoljar (trans.), ‘Introduction’, *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> In comparisons of Romanticism with twentieth-century theory there is a tendency to conflate poststructuralism and postmodernism. This does not really present a problem for my study because a clear distinction between the two is neither possible nor desirable. In any case, German critics in particular, when they refer to ‘Postmodernismus’, often mean Barthes and Derrida, rather than, say, Lacan or Lyotard.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Saul, ‘Aesthetic Humanism (1798-1830)’, in *The Cambridge History of German Literature*, ed. by Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 202-71 (p. 203).

alternative'. As we shall see, it is not the only 'either/or' opposition to be found in readings of German Romantic literature.

### **The Romantic Writer: Ironist or mystified self?**

In his general introduction to a critical anthology of German Romantic theory, Jochen Schulte-Sasse identifies the opposition of yearning for plenitude to awareness of metaphysical void as the central issue in the debate over the continuing relevance of Romanticism. I find his way of summarizing the opposing positions very useful. In order to clarify a highly complex argument, we can say that Schulte-Sasse borrows from Paul de Man two opposing ways of reading Romanticism. The Romantic writer can be read as either an 'ironist' or a 'mystified self'. The latter interpretation (and this would appear to underpin readings such as Saul's) would be governed by what de Man calls an 'aesthetic ideology'. Schulte-Sasse defines such an ideology as:

an ideology – or, more precisely, an institutionalized discursive practice – that seeks to suppress the structurality of structures in favor of an illusive experience of wholeness. To use Lacanian terminology, the aesthetic enables the subject to establish an imaginary relationship between self and text. Art serves here as a mirror in which the subject experiences itself as unified and as possessing an equally unified, privileged consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse, 'Romanticism's Paradoxical Articulation of Desire', in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. by Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 1-43 (p. 2).



He points out that many artistic movements, as well as many conventional readings of Romantic writers, have been susceptible to such an aesthetic ideology and identifies a tradition of what he describes as ‘misreadings’ of Romanticism, by critics ranging from Hegel to Benjamin. These so-called misreadings seek to emphasize the Romantic desire for unity at the expense of moments at which the very impossibility of this unity is articulated. Schulte-Sasse regards de Man’s 1969 essay ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’ as the first reading to question this and to deal adequately with the Romantics’ acknowledgement of the impossibility of transcendence or unity. The concepts of irony and allegory (as opposed to the concept of symbol which rests on the notion of an inherent unity between the symbol and its meaning) are central to de Man’s argument, being as they are modes of discourse which admit to a radical disjunction between signifier and signified. Schulte-Sasse finds de Man particularly interesting for the way his discourse has a ‘tendency to slide from statements concerning representation to ones concerning the self’.<sup>8</sup> This close relationship between representation and subjectivity is one of the main themes of my thesis. Chapter 1, for instance, deals with the role of representation in Novalis’s version of self-consciousness, and in the final chapter, we will look at how representation and subjectivity interact in our attempts to relate to and communicate with other people, other subjects. De Man says that irony ‘reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality’.<sup>9</sup> Schulte-Sasse remarks that the Romantics, thus read, are ‘radical structuralists, accepting the inevitability of structural, that is, spatial and temporal, difference, and consequently the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 222.

impossibility of constructing a subject identical with itself'.<sup>10</sup> However, Schulte-Sasse goes on to question the validity of such a clear distinction between the two critical stances and to hint at a different way of reading, of circumventing what amounts to a stand-off between critics like Saul, on the one hand, and de Man, on the other. But before exploring this different approach, I want to look at some of the defining characteristics of the opposing approaches and at a few Novalis critics who seem to fall into each category. These critics are specifically concerned with the modernity of Romanticism – indeed, two of them actually seek to consider Novalis in relation to Derrida. By highlighting one or two issues from their texts, we can see how each critic defines explicitly his or her own position in terms of its opposition to the other stance. I am, therefore, going to retain the terms for a while longer because they are convenient designations, useful signposts for mapping the ways in which diametrically opposed views can emerge from an 'either/or' approach to reading Romanticism.

The two opposing ways of interpreting and defining the modernity of early German Romanticism can be seen as a manifestation of a more general divide in the field of literary criticism. Oversimplifying to an extent, we might say that the critics of one camp posit or attempt to locate an extra-linguistic ground, origin or other form of presence. These readers subscribe to what Derrida terms the 'transcendental signified'. As both origin and telos, outside of and/or anterior to language, it is the transcendental signified which in the last instance guarantees meaning or truth. Readings governed by the assumption of a transcendental signified tend to

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<sup>10</sup> Schulte-Sasse, p. 5.

characterize the early Romantic writer as a ‘mystified self’ in search of the elusive absolute or metaphysical plenitude. Members of the opposing faction, to whom Bowie gives the name ‘anti-foundationalists’, are held to be intent upon tracing the play of signifiers, without attempting to find any central foundation or transcendental signified.

Géza von Molnár is one critic who seems to want to rescue Novalis from the clutches of critics who would proclaim him a ‘radical structuralist’. His book, *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context: Novalis and Artistic Autonomy* is, as its title suggests, devoted to demonstrating that Novalis’s theories on self-consciousness and language, for all their modernity, remain firmly rooted in the idea of moral freedom which is vital for both Kant and Fichte. This freedom is unthinkable without an essential self-identity – the self-identity of the ego must remain intact in the flow of time and circumstance. Molnár’s argument is highly complex and subtle. He actually highlights many of the striking similarities between Novalis and Derrida. He even goes so far as to say that, in some respects, Novalis’s concept of *Poesie* can be equated with Derrida’s *écriture*, observing at one point: ‘Not only does he [Novalis] lay his text open to deconstruction but he appears to deconstruct it himself.’<sup>11</sup> However, and once again this is anticipated by the title, Molnár persists in identifying Derrida as an ‘autonomist’, who ‘demands’ the nonreferentiality of the artistic statement,<sup>12</sup> and would have us believe, moreover, that we can never escape the ‘prison walls of language’.<sup>13</sup> This characterization of Derrida is by no means

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<sup>11</sup> Géza von Molnár, *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context: Novalis and Artistic Autonomy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

restricted to Molnár and, as we shall see, it is evidence of a general and very persistent misreading of the texts of Derrida.

Paul de Man could be said to belong to the other category of critics, those who emphasize what they see as the Romantics' own deliberate articulation of the illusory nature of such notions as unity, identity and totality. But, as Schulte-Sasse points out, de Man is one of the very first critics of Romantic literature to do so. I would suggest, therefore, that he emphasizes difference and temporality in order to question the dominant conception of the Romantic poet as 'mystified self'. Another critic who might be described as seeking to read the Romantic writer as ironist and radical structuralist is Alice Kuzniar. Her study, *Delayed Endings*, defines its argument very clearly in terms of a binary opposition between, on the one hand, her own insistence on 'radical temporality', and on the other, the contentions of older Novalis criticism which emphasizes unending Romantic progression towards transcendence and fulfilment. For her, as we will see in Chapter 3, 'nonclosure' is something radically different to the idea of unending progression. She questions the ways in which Novalis critics have in the past sought to imbue the narrative structures in his work with non-religious, but nonetheless transcendental, significance. These readings she describes, in an article of 1988 entitled 'Reassessing Romantic Reflexivity', as 'theologically restorative'.<sup>14</sup> Like this article, *Delayed Endings* was written almost twenty years ago and, as with de Man, the very force of her counter-argument stems partly from a need to shake up the dominant

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<sup>14</sup> See Kuzniar, 'Reassessing Romantic Reflexivity,' *Germanic Review*, 63 (1988), 77-86 (78). Like de Man, she suggests here that this theologically restorative tendency of Romantic scholarship – even its 'deconstructive strain' – can be traced to Walter Benjamin.

interpretation of Novalis as the archetypal Romantic poet, filled with an indeterminate longing for the golden age.

The tendency to work in terms of such oppositions is in a certain way inevitable. If poststructuralism has taught us anything it is that *all* texts can give rise to different – even diametrically opposed – readings. However, when reading Novalis and Derrida – both separately and together – adhering too strongly to one of the two positions outlined above might obscure the extent to which these writers continually and consciously complicate such oppositions, preferring instead to trace the contours of the strange folds and paradoxes by which the ‘either’ and the ‘or’ are linked. In fact, I argue in this thesis that the most important and interesting similarity between Derrida and Novalis is their affirmation of paradox.

## Critical Implications

Certain critics are very much aware of the importance of paradox and also of its implications for any reading which seeks to bring together Romanticism and poststructuralism. Herbert Uerlings, for instance, takes issue with Kuzniar’s *Delayed Endings*, in particular with her assertion that Novalis, and the other early Romantics, as well as Hölderlin, renounce all teleology in favour of ‘discontinuous seriality’.<sup>15</sup> A certain impatience with such black-and-white distinctions – and not just those of Kuzniar – can be detected when Uerlings comments that: ‘Alternativen wie

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<sup>15</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 8.

“Dekonstruktion oder Utopie” oder “Diskontinuität oder Teleologie” sind zu heuristischen Zwecken brauchbar; für eine differenzierte Interpretation des Hardenbergschen Werkes im historischen Kontext sind sie viel zu schroff.’<sup>16</sup>

Uerlings suggests a solution to such a dichotomy – and he makes the point that this is Novalis’s own alternative. This solution is the paradoxical ‘*Teleologie ohne Telos*’,<sup>17</sup> and he shows how Novalis reacts to the loss of a telos through a strategy which Uerlings terms ‘narrative Konstruktion immanenter Transzendenz’.<sup>18</sup> This phrase is a way of naming the Romantics’ conscious fictionalization of the absolute. I hinted above that Schulte-Sasse finds Paul de Man’s distinction between ‘ironist’ and ‘mystified self’ ultimately inadequate, and even misleading, to the extent that it fails to emphasize the central paradox of Romanticism itself – namely that an explicitly futile desire for an impossible absolute is still shown to be *necessary*.<sup>19</sup> Schulte-Sasse points to the importance of the word ‘Schein’ – translated by de Man as ‘fiction’ – and sees the Romantics’ emphasis on concepts such as ‘belief, fiction, and illusion’ as being the key to appreciating the central paradox of Romanticism outlined in the following quotation:

The Romantic ‘believes’ in a ‘future unity’ in the sense that he consciously constructs such unity as a fiction, an illusion that enables him to construct or ‘synthesize’ himself as unified, while always remaining aware that every construction is preliminary and incomplete.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg genannt Novalis: Werk und Forschung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), p. 624. The epilogue [pp. 616-25] takes as its title the question ‘Konstruktion oder Dekonstruktion?’ and I have found it very helpful in situating Novalis in relation to literary studies today.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 622.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 624.

<sup>19</sup> See Schulte-Sasse, pp. 6-8.

<sup>20</sup> Schulte-Sasse, p. 7.

The Romantics operate in a situation of profound tension between these two apparently contradictory positions, maintaining simultaneously a belief in future plenitude and the awareness of its impossibility. Schulte-Sasse describes this as 'Romanticism's paradoxical articulation of desire' and his description corresponds to 'narrative Konstruktion immanenter Transzendenz' as described by Uerlings. This recognition of the importance of paradox is in my opinion the most productive and interesting way to approach any comparison between Romantic and poststructuralist thought.

As I have indicated, the tendency to work in terms of oppositions such as the one between 'longing for metaphysical plenitude' and 'awareness of metaphysical void' is almost impossible to avoid. One can therefore detect oppositional thinking even in works which otherwise strive to avoid it. Significantly, this applies to interpretations of Derrida as much as of Novalis. Andrew Bowie, as I mentioned above, recognizing the broad split in literary criticism and philosophy, refers to 'anti-foundationalists', but I take issue with the fact that he seems to want to count Derrida among them. Derrida has his own way of describing the two apparently incompatible ways of reading which we are considering here. Bowie cites Derrida's identification of two 'interpretations of interpretation'. One type 'dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin that escapes the play and order of the sign', and the other 'affirms play and tries to go beyond man and humanism.'<sup>21</sup> However, I would argue that here Derrida

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<sup>21</sup> Bowie, p. 47. Bowie translates Derrida from *L'écriture et la différence*: 'Il y a donc deux interprétations de l'interprétation, de la structure, du signe et du jeu. L'une cherche à déchiffrer, rêve de déchiffrer une vérité ou une origine échappant au jeu et à l'ordre du signe, et vit comme un exil la nécessité de l'interprétation. L'autre, qui n'est plus tournée vers l'origine, affirme le jeu et tente de passer au-delà de l'homme et de l'humanisme ...]. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 427.



is concerned with Nietzsche and does not explicitly align himself with the latter version of interpretation. It is true that Derrida never ceases to question the existence of a 'transcendental signified', but this does not mean that he has no interest in such questions as truth, 'man', the subject and, consequently, the complicated relationship between subjectivity and language. Later, Bowie returns to the two 'interpretations of interpretation'. He makes the following point:

It should already be clear, then, that Derrida's model of the 'two interpretations of interpretation' in modernity, the one seeking the origin and foundation of meaning, the other delighting in the infinite play of signification, is inadequate to the real tension in question here, because it does not give sufficient space to other ways in which conceptions of language and meaning are explored.<sup>22</sup>

However, a remark of Bowie's hints that he is not entirely happy with his own characterization of Derrida. In the concluding chapter of his book, he qualifies the above with the observation that 'in recent years' Derrida has moved away from the first position ('which affirms play and tries to go beyond man and humanism').

Bowie continues:

The second position, that Derrida has increasingly come to espouse in recent years, sees truth as an ethical obligation inherent in communication with the Other, which leaves space to connect truth to what can be revealed by aesthetic modes of articulation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bowie, pp. 92-93.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 282.



Derrida has *always* been interested in the Other – as productive ‘force’<sup>24</sup> of difference and *différance* – and to say that, in the earlier works, he is *only* interested in the play of signifiers is to accuse him falsely of a kind of (Nietzschean) scepticism. I said above that all writers can be read in different ways, and no doubt Derrida can be read with great emphasis on his interest in the never-ending play of signifiers. However, such a one-sided interpretation can only obscure the extent to which he is *not only* interested in the play of signifiers. Bowie succumbs to this only at times, but we have already looked at Géza von Molnár’s unequivocal rejection of what he calls Derrida’s attempts to prove that we can never escape the ‘prison walls of language’. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of Derridean thinking, and it is significant that Molnár has a certain amount of trouble in supporting such a characterization with quotations from Derrida’s work. It seems particularly ironic, given that *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context* is an attempt to rescue Novalis from the clutches of those critics who would see him as the archetypal Romantic solipsist, that Molnár makes precisely the same type of mistake with regard to Derrida. The kind of one-sided interpretations which can be seen in readings of Derrida are of the same order as those which account for the diametrically opposed views which constitute Novalis criticism.

Novalis and Derrida are more likely than other writers to inspire such decisively conflicting interpretations because of the role of paradox and aporia in

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<sup>24</sup> I have chosen to place the word ‘force’ in inverted commas because it is particularly difficult to find ways of describing *différance* without running the risk of *fixing* something which is never stable, which is itself subject to *différance*. Derrida says that *différance* is neither a ‘word’ nor a ‘concept’, and he often uses the word ‘force’ as a matter of convenience. For him ‘force’ has echoes of Nietzsche, and it is thus particularly apt for describing *différance* because, if a force *is* anything, it is a play of differences and quantities in motion. See the essay ‘La différence’, in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 1-29.

their works. We have already seen how two Novalis critics acknowledge this with their own formulations: Uerlings speaks of 'Teleologie ohne Telos' and Schulte-Sasse's term is 'Romanticism's paradoxical articulation of desire'. Building on the work of critics like Schulte-Sasse, this study seeks to show that only readings which are attuned to paradox can do justice to the complexity of early Romantic thinking on identity, language, literature and philosophy, and to suggest, furthermore, that such readings can better appreciate Romanticism's proximity to poststructuralist thought.

Along with Schulte-Sasse, other critics such as Bowie, Kuzniar, Gail Newman, Mary Strand, Lisa Roetzel, Manfred Frank, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have investigated the paradoxes inherent in Romantic thought and begun to demonstrate affinities with twentieth-century literature and theory. I have, therefore, sought to build on their critical insights and have supported my thesis with quotations from their work, especially at the points where they are content to 'endure' – Derrida's word – aporia and paradox, to read and misread at the same time, and this in the interest of respecting the intricacies of both Romanticism and poststructuralism. But, ultimately, it is the texts of Derrida and Novalis themselves which have provided the model for my reading which tries to, if not avoid, then at least to complicate an either/or approach. I have therefore quoted both writers extensively, letting their texts – their writings which are also readings – speak for themselves, in order to reveal striking resemblances in their affirmation and celebration of paradox. This affirmation of aporia is felt in all the various aspects of living and thinking, loving and writing, which are the themes of my thesis. The resemblances between these two writers are, at times, uncanny, and reading Novalis

*responsibly* with Derrida, after Derrida, before Derrida, is not only interesting but has much to teach us about both.

## **Methods of (Mis)reading**

I propose to undertake close comparative readings of some of the works of Novalis and Derrida in order to identify the most interesting and important affinities between them. We will find that it is through the affirmation of paradox that their writing corresponds most closely. In view of this, it seems to me that for critics to take an either/or approach is fundamentally disloyal to both writers, precisely because they themselves question such an approach. John Neubauer expresses the hope that ‘ein [...] besser verstandener oder besser angewandter Postmodernismus zu einem besseren Novalis-Bild beitragen könnte.’<sup>25</sup> I agree entirely with Neubauer on this point and hope that a close comparison of the writings of Novalis and Derrida will indeed lead to a better understanding of both Romanticism and poststructuralism.

But what does it mean to strive for a ‘better’ understanding? I have used the word ‘misunderstanding’ more than once and also cited critics such as Bowie, Culler and Schulte-Sasse who all use the term ‘misreading’. We need to turn our attention to the ‘mis-’ of misunderstanding and misreading. I said above that poststructuralism has given us a new horizon and new ways of conceptualizing the modernity of Romanticism and its role in the emergence of literary theory today. These new ways

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<sup>25</sup> John Neubauer, ‘Novalis und der Postmodernismus’, in *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität: Studien zur deutschen Literatur seit der Romantik: Festschrift für Hans-Joachim Mähl*, ed. by Klaus-Detlef Müller et al. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), pp. 207-20 (p. 208).

of reading have naturally had an impact on the critical terminology which we now use and my own study is no exception. This critical terminology, however, brings certain difficulties. In terms of deconstruction, difficulties arise when we are deploying Derridean terminology to discuss other writers, but they also crop up when writing *about* Derrida. This pertains whether or not we – to set up yet another opposition – use ‘traditional’ or ‘deconstructive’ ways of reading and writing. Derrida would question this opposition and, as for the ‘traditional’ ways, he would probably want to stop at this point and question the phrase ‘writing about Derrida’. He might ask what it means to say ‘writing *about*’ and he would certainly ask what it means to say ‘Derrida’. Do we mean Derrida the man, Derrida the philosopher or the body of writings which can be assembled under the signature ‘Jacques Derrida’? And almost every single term used throughout this dissertation could be similarly questioned. However, it is impossible not to continue using words like ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ or even ‘word’. Derrida has never failed to admit this, contrary to the various interpretations of deconstruction which emerge from the work of critics who censure him, and also, interestingly, from his most enthusiastic devotees. He explains that we cannot simply throw away our existing terms, recognizing that philosophical discourse only emerges through oppositional logic, through precisely the same ‘either/or’ thinking which we have been discussing. Derrida uses the phrase ‘all or nothing oppositions’. He says: ‘Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of all or nothing. [...] It is impossible or illegitimate to form a *philosophical concept* outside this logic of all or nothing.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Derrida, ‘Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion’, *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 111-60. (For the discussion of oppositional logic, see especially pp. 116-17.) *Limited Inc* collects for the first time the essays – some unpublished in French – which represent Derrida’s most sustained engagement with Anglo-American speech act

Indeed, he has always stressed that we cannot simply do away with old terms in favour of new ones, because we would then run the risk of making these new terms – including *différance* or the supplement – into master terms, as though they were then themselves exempt from questioning and deconstruction. The attempt to posit *différance* or the supplement in order to *oppose* oppositional logic is constricted by an internal contradiction, a kind of double bind: how does one *oppose opposition*? Recognizing the double bind, Derrida says:

To this oppositional logic, which is necessarily, legitimately, a logic of ‘all or nothing’, I oppose nothing, least of all a logic of approximation [...]; rather I add a supplementary complication that calls for other concepts, for other thoughts beyond the concept and another form of ‘general theory’, or rather another discourse, another ‘logic’ that accounts for the impossibility of concluding such a ‘general theory’.<sup>27</sup>

Derrida argues that words like ‘concept’ or ‘idea’ must continue to be used but ‘sous rature’ or ‘under erasure’ – a sort of retaining while re-inscribing and complicating. So in a thesis which questions ‘words’ and ‘concepts’ such as ‘representation’, ‘philosophy’ and ‘literature’, I have at times used these terms without comment or qualification, partly as a matter of convenience, but also because, in a more profound sense, there is no alternative.

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theory. The original ‘Signature Événement Contexte’ was first published in French in *Marges de la philosophie* (1972), and later re-published in a translation by Samuel Weber and Geoffrey Mehlman in the journal *Glyph*, 1 (1977). John Searle’s article, ‘Re-iterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida’, which appeared in *Glyph*’s second volume (1977), refers to the Weber-Mehlman translation as does Derrida’s response, the essay ‘Limited Inc a b c ...’ (translated by Weber). *Limited Inc* includes a new afterword by Derrida, ‘Toward an Ethic of Discussion’, also translated by Weber. I have chosen to quote in English from *Limited Inc*, with the exception of ‘Signature Événement Contexte’ – I cite the French version of this text first published in *Marges de la philosophie*.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 117.

On the other hand, this means that, while Derridean concepts such as *différance*, the re-mark and the logic of supplementarity have provided a useful framework for identifying similarities, it is vital to stress that this study does not represent an attempt to *apply* poststructuralist theory to Novalis. There is no doubt that the texts of Novalis could be ‘deconstructed’ in order to demonstrate the warring significations that seem to emerge from them. A reading of this kind, however, would operate on the assumption that Derrida, as the more ‘knowing’ writer, can somehow ‘demystify’ Novalis as Romantic poet. The problem with such a perspective is that it is bound to overlook the extent to which Novalis is himself consciously thematizing the contradictions and paradoxes in his work and can, therefore, only obscure the very modernity of the Romantic position. Having said that, however, if we take Jonathan Culler’s following definition of deconstruction, my reading *has* been informed by deconstructive methods of reading. Culler regards one of the principal effects of deconstructive criticism as precisely its disruption of the ‘historical scheme that contrasts romantic with post-romantic literature and sees the latter as a sophisticated or ironical demystification of the excesses and delusions of the former’. He continues:

Like so many historical patterns, this scheme is seductive, especially since, while providing a principle of intelligibility that seems to insure access to the literature of the past, it associates temporal progression with the advance of understanding and puts us and our literature in the position of greatest awareness and self-awareness. The strategy of many deconstructive readings has been to show that the ironic demystification supposedly distinctive of post-romantic literature is already to be found in the works of the greatest romantics – particularly Wordsworth and Rousseau – whose very force leads them to be consistently misread.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 248.

In this sense, then I have undertaken a ‘deconstructive’ reading of Novalis. However, and Derrida has always insisted on this, one of the steps in a deconstructive reading is to tease out elements in a text which already appear to be at odds with one another. This does not apply only to texts which thematize these apparent contradictions or, to put it another way, which ‘deconstruct themselves’. As we shall see when we come to Rousseau, texts which are ‘blind’ to these warring significations can nonetheless be read as saying something other than the author intended. (Derrida is sometimes regarded as dismissing out of hand authorial intention. This image has perhaps arisen from too close an identification with Roland Barthes and his famous essay on the death of the author.) Deconstruction is, in Culler’s words, a kind of ‘writing with both hands’, a writing which produces a constant shifting between perspectives without seeking a synthesis but rather allowing an ‘irresolvable alternation of aporia’ to stand.<sup>29</sup> When I use Derridean terms in order to appreciate the deconstructive elements in Novalis’s texts and his awareness of aporia, this does not mean that I wish to join the ranks of critics who would claim Novalis as a ‘radical structuralist’ or ‘poststructuralist’. John Neubauer warns against precisely this and attacks critics who randomly collect an arsenal of citations from Novalis’s work in order to fashion their ‘Novalis-Bild nach eigenen Zwecken’.<sup>30</sup> (Significantly, many critics have said the same of their fellow critics’ readings of Derrida.) I *have* quoted extensively from the texts of both writers and have, of course, been selective in the texts I have chosen and, indeed, the quotations – this, too, is unavoidable. I would respond to Neubauer’s warning by saying that Derrida reminds us that every quotation is, by its very nature, *out of context*.

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<sup>29</sup> Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> Neubauer, p. 207.



For me, the interest in a comparative study lies more in examining similarities than differences. That Derrida and Novalis are different goes without saying. Apart from the fact that enumerating all the similarities *and* differences in their respective bodies of work would take a lifetime, it would, in fact, contribute very little to the debate on the relationship between poststructuralism and Romanticism. In looking at similarities, my purpose is not to claim Novalis for a particular type of criticism or literature. I have not tried to gather ammunition to defend a critical school or movement. By outlining above the work of several important critics, I have simply tried to identify and set out at this early stage the two broadly discernible – and seemingly incompatible – approaches which divide much criticism of Romanticism: the Romantic writer as either ‘mystified self’, yearning for plenitude, as Saul would have it, or as de Man’s knowing ‘ironist’. These two positions provide a backdrop for my own readings, being instances of precisely the type of ‘either/or’ approach to reading which I, following in the steps of Schulte-Sasse, Strand, Newman and others, have sought to avoid.

Derrida has always insisted that a text can give rise to different readings. This is why we cannot dismiss either of the two critical stances as *misreadings* or *misunderstandings*, even though critics like Schulte-Sasse do not hold back in doing so. Because we would have to then ask: what would be the opposite of a misreading? A reading? A true reading? An objective reading? Derrida has long reminded us that any claim to objectivity is every bit as suspect as a so-called ‘biased’ reading or misreading. I know that, like every reading, my thesis will inevitably be a misreading. However, adhering strictly to an either/or approach can only fail to do



justice to Novalis and Derrida precisely because paradox is so important in their texts. When discussing Novalis and Derrida, it is somehow inappropriate to insist too much on the distinction between reading and misreading. Both of them remind us that texts can live on only through misreadings which are also writings. Rather than think of the text as an 'original', intact and self-identical before it is read or 'translated', we must follow Novalis and Derrida in thinking of the reader's response as opening the very possibility of the text itself – the text always already awaits the other. This makes it even more important to understand that literary criticism is *at once* 'serious' and 'a game'. If we are to attempt to read faithfully and with respect, it cannot be otherwise. Both Derrida and Novalis speak of reading as a kind of writing. Novalis tells us: 'Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor seyn',<sup>31</sup> the word 'muß' resonating with Derrida's demand when he says:

S'il y a une unité de la lecture et de l'écriture, comme on le pense facilement aujourd'hui, si la lecture *est* l'écriture, cette unité ne désigne ni la confusion indifférenciée ni l'identité de tout repos; le *est* qui accouple la lecture à l'écriture doit en découdre.

Il faudrait donc, d'un seul geste, mais dédoublé, lire et écrire. Et celui-là n'aurait rien compris au jeu qui se sentirait du coup autorisé à en rajouter, c'est-à-dire à ajouter n'importe quoi. Il n'ajouterait rien, la couture ne tiendrait pas. Réciproquement ne lirait même pas celui que la 'prudence méthodologique', les 'normes de l'objectivité' et les 'gardes-fous du savoir' retiendraient d'y mettre du sien. Même niaiserie, même stérilité du 'pas sérieux' et du 'sérieux'. Le supplément de lecture ou d'écriture doit être rigoureusement prescrit mais par la nécessité d'un *jeu*, signe auquel il faut accorder le système de tous ses pouvoirs.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> N II, p. 470, 'Vermischte Bemerkungen', no. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 80.

## **Alterity, Paradox, Aphorism and Desire**

Turning now to questions of structure, I would like to outline the parameters of this study and say a few words on the texts I have selected for close reading. It has been particularly difficult to order the various themes of my comparison. This is mainly because – as will become clear – each theme cannot be fully separated from the others. One might even say that each chapter tries to do the same thing: namely, outline the contours of a certain paradoxical relation with the Other. We will see this, for instance, in the way that certain texts appear in more than one chapter. This is partly because the works of both Novalis and Derrida form a kind of unfolding in which earlier themes and problems are always there; always already caught up in the process of reworking and rewriting. However, for the sake of clarity, it has been necessary to identify several different aspects or perspectives through which this paradoxical relation to alterity is articulated. The four terms which make up the title of this study – namely ‘the Other’, ‘paradox’, ‘aphorism’ and ‘desire’ – are intended to draw together some of the concerns which are pertinent to the thought of both Novalis and Derrida. Each term names one of the themes on which their texts correspond most closely.

I have chosen to begin with those texts of Novalis and Derrida which deal with the question of self-consciousness because they provide a relatively clear illustration of the paradoxical and temporal relation to the Other in the thought of both. This relation to the absolutely-other – which Derrida sometimes names ‘l’autre’, ‘l’absolument-autre’ or ‘le tout-autre’ – will guide us through the readings

and writings of all the other chapters. While we cannot directly equate what Novalis terms ‘the absolute’ with the Derridean Other, we *can* trace how both writers conceive of ways of articulating something which cannot be made a direct object of discourse. In Chapter 1, then, I compare texts by Novalis and Derrida which concern themselves explicitly with the metaphysical concept of the absolute. Derrida’s reading of Emmanuel Levinas, ‘La violence et la métaphysique’, is one such text. As with all of Derrida’s texts, ‘La violence et la métaphysique’ is itself a *reading* – an interpretation and commentary on the texts of another writer or philosopher. Alongside Derrida’s reading of Levinas, we will briefly consider his essay on Foucault, ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, also published in *L’écriture et la différence*. Derrida’s essays will be considered alongside Novalis’s reading of the philosophy of one of his contemporaries, Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The insights of the so-called ‘Fichte-Studien’ – a collection of unpublished notes and reflections on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* – inform all of Novalis’s work<sup>33</sup> (including his thinking on the subject-object relation which will concern us in the final chapter).

The second chapter considers literature and philosophy as specific forms of discourse, and the distinctions and similarities between them, and asks among other things whether they differ in their apprehension or articulation of the absolutely other. This entails looking at Novalis’s and Derrida’s respective views on the functioning of language itself and at their positions on issues such as representation, ‘truth’ and meaning. Derrida texts which are particularly concerned with these questions include his readings of Rousseau (in *De la grammatologie*) and of Plato

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<sup>33</sup> See in this connection Géza von Molnár, *Novalis’ ‘Fichte-Studies’: The Foundation of His Aesthetics* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1970).

(‘La pharmacie de Platon’ in *La dissémination*). I also consider his engagement with the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle in the texts collected in *Limited Inc.* These texts are compared with Novalis’s speculations on signs and language from the ‘Fichte-Studien’, as well as with a detailed reading of his short text on the functioning of language, ‘Monolog’. ‘Monolog’ is a remarkable text for a number of reasons, not least for its demonstration that paradox and undecidability are among the most important features of Romantic literature. By the end of the second chapter, we will have started to move away from more strictly ‘philosophical’ concerns, in order to consider the emergence of ‘modern’ literature and literary theory in the era of German Romanticism as a response to philosophy’s failure to deal with that which cannot be made a direct object of discourse .

Chapter 3 takes up the discussion of literature and examines texts by Novalis and Derrida which best illustrate a shared interest in ‘nonclosure’ and the self-referentiality of literature. Building on the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and Kuzniar, this chapter considers the Romantics’ preference for fragmentary forms of discourse alongside Derrida’s texts on dissociation and never-ending undecidability. The word ‘aphorism’ as it appears in the title of this thesis corresponds not only to the Romantic predilection for the aphorism or ‘finished fragment’, but also to Derrida’s expansion of the term to include separation, dissociation and the ways in which these structure both language and literature. Two of Derrida’s shorter texts, ‘L’aphorisme à contretemps’ (a reading of *Romeo and Juliet*) and ‘Devant la loi’, which is a reading of the Kafka short-story of the same title, are considered in

connection with Novalis's narrative strategies for evading closure in his unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

Finally, an examination of the concepts of love and desire in Chapter 4 reveals fascinating similarities between Novalis and Derrida when they write on relationships with a friend or loved one. In the case of Novalis, we will look at the role of Mathilde, the female other in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which points to possible answers to some of the questions of feminist criticism. We will see too that, for both Novalis and Derrida, it is death which sheds more light on the essential separation which always already constitutes our relation to the other. The Derridean texts which best elucidate the interweaving of death, language and literature are *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* and the essay 'Pysché: Invention de l'autre.' The discussion of the subject-object relation reprises the question of respect for alterity raised by Chapter 1's consideration of the philosophy of consciousness and it is to this that we now turn.

## Chapter 1

### Self-Consciousness: The (De)construction of the Absolute

**‘Toute la valeur est d’abord constituée par un sujet théorétique. Rien ne se gagne ou perd qu’en termes de clarté et de non-clarté, d’évidence, de présence et d’absence pour une conscience, de prise ou de perte de conscience. La diaphanéité est la valeur suprême; et l’univocité.’<sup>1</sup>**

Derrida  
*L’écriture et la différence*

**‘Sollte das höchste Princip das höchste Paradoxon in seiner Aufgabe enthalten?’<sup>2</sup>**

Novalis  
‘Logologische Fragmente’

### The Philosophy of Consciousness

In an article entitled ‘Novalis und der Postmodernismus’<sup>3</sup> John Neubauer outlines areas which, in his opinion, would be of significance for a comparison of Novalis’s thought with postmodernism. One topic he identifies as being of particular significance is ‘Subjektidentität’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the question of the ego is perhaps the most important area. It is certainly a good place to start. I want to look at self-consciousness first because, apart from the fact that it has always been of interest to poets and philosophers alike, it provides us with one of the clearest indications of

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> N II, p.523-24, ‘Logologische Fragmente’, no. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Neubauer, John, ‘Novalis und der Postmodernismus’, in *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität: Studien zur deutschen Literatur seit der Romantik*, ed. by Klaus-Detlef Müller et al. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), pp. 207-20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

similarities in Romantic and poststructuralist perspectives. The most significant similarity between Novalis and Derrida is the importance they accord to paradox. The texts of both writers are often meditations upon a certain relation with the so-called absolute, and looking at their reflections on philosophy's desire for a secure foundation or absolute origin leads us directly to consider the emphasis which both place on aporia. Derrida does use the term 'the absolute' in certain texts but, to take a slightly more general view, the notion of an absolute *foundation* (for this is what is at stake in Novalis's engagement with Fichte's system) can be regarded as analogous with the Derridean terms *présence* and the 'transcendental'. These are examined and called into question by many of Derrida's texts, in particular the earlier ones. Looking at the concept of the absolute will reveal similarities in the texts of Novalis and Derrida which will elucidate all the other aspects of my thesis. It is important to begin with the problem of the ego because the functioning of self-consciousness, as conceived of by Novalis and Derrida, will start to reveal the configurations and structures through which the other themes of this study – our experience of otherness, the opposition between philosophical and literary discourse, aphorism, self-referentiality and desire – can also be understood.

The reading of Novalis's 'Fichte-Studien' (1795-96) will largely take place alongside a discussion of Derrida's collection of essays published in 1967 as *L'écriture et la différence*. One piece, in particular, which helps illuminate our discussion of the absolute is the essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, 'La violence et la métaphysique'. In his excellent comparative study, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Simon Critchley examines Derrida's relation to Levinas and points

out that Derrida has explicitly identified Levinas's project with his own. Critchley cites several of Derrida's remarks, the most 'surprising' of which is his response to André Jacob's question on Levinas in an interview published in *Alterités*. Jacob asks Derrida to specify the distance he maintains with respect to Levinas. Derrida responds:

Je ne sais pas.... Devant une pensée comme celle de Levinas, je n'ai jamais d'objection. Je suis prêt à souscrire à tout ce qu'il dit. Ça ne veut pas dire que je pense la même chose de la même façon; mais là les différences sont très difficiles à déterminer.<sup>5</sup>

While we cannot directly equate what Novalis terms 'the absolute' with Derrida's and Levinas's 'tout-autre', we can trace how all three writers conceive of ways of articulating something which cannot be made an object of discourse. Novalis's reflections on relating to the absolute correspond closely to those pointed to by 'La violence et la métaphysique'. Both the concept of the absolute and that of the totally-other – 'le tout-autre' is Levinas's term for that which cannot be an object of discourse – can be seen as ways of preserving some orientation towards truth and ethical responsibility without which we would, in Andrew Bowie's words, be 'trapped by the paradoxes of relativism and the regresses of nihilism'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we shall see in Chapter 2 that a new kind of 'literature' can be regarded as emerging in the Romantic era only in relation to this problematic – as a way of articulating and re-articulating the truth by striving to relate to the absolute without seeking to objectify it. As such, an understanding of our paradoxical relation to that which

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Alterités* (Paris: Osiris, 1986), p. 74. Cited by Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 75.



cannot be finally articulated assumes great importance, particularly with regard to Derrida, who has often faced criticism for his perceived insistence on the empty play of signifiers. And the image of Novalis, as a Romantic poet yearning for the unreachable absolute, simply does not stand up to a close examination of his remarkable insights into the activity of the ego.

## Grounding the Self

In the eighteenth century, in the wake of the teachings of Kant, philosophy begins to devote itself more than ever to the question of the subject. Novalis contrasts the philosophical activity of his contemporaries with that of the ancients: 'Die Alten nannten [...] Naturlehre etc. auch Philosophie – wir haben sie auf Denken des Grundes der *Vorstellungen* und Empfindungen, kurz der Veränderungen d[es] Subjects eingeschränkt.'<sup>7</sup> Literature, too, seems to turn inward, starting to explore its own conditions of possibility as well as looking at the role of language and literature in shaping the ego's perception of itself and of the world of living others in which it is situated. In the next chapter, I will compare literature and philosophy as specific forms of discourse and ask, among other things, whether Novalis and Derrida see any differences in the ways in which these types of writing deal with questions of the self and other forms of presence which are held to be of the order of an absolutely anterior reality. For now, though, where I use the word 'philosophy', it will be largely in the sense accorded to it by Plato when he speaks of 'living philosophy'. In

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<sup>7</sup>N II, p. 272, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 567.

this sense, philosophy can be seen as analogous with pure thought or the living *logos* rather than as a specific type of discourse. I think it is fairly safe to say that, at least at certain points in history, philosophy would like to believe that it is transparent, closer to pure thought and truth, to *présence* and the absolute foundation, than other forms of discourse. Indeed, Andrew Bowie makes a very interesting point about one eighteenth-century German philosopher, F. H. Jacobi, who asserts that his own position should be described as ‘Unphilosophie’ because he renounces the notion that knowledge could be finally grounded in a system.<sup>8</sup> This, as we will discuss in the chapter on literature and philosophy, is one of Derrida’s main problems with metaphysics – precisely its assumption that it is closer to the truth, the foundation or the origin, than other types of writing. And in one of the ‘Fichte-Studien’ fragments Novalis, speculating on the nature of philosophy, also observes that *grounding* a system is both its ultimate goal and its necessary first step:

Filosofiren muß eine eigne Art von Denken seyn. Was thu’ ich indem ich filosofire? Ich denke über einen Grund nach. Dem Filosofiren liegt also ein Streben nach dem Denken eines Grundes zum Grunde.<sup>9</sup>

Novalis draws together several important issues here. Firstly, the goal of philosophy is qualified by the word ‘Streben’; later we will look at this idea and note its importance for the Romantic stance. For now we can note that he stresses that

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<sup>8</sup> Bowie, p. 42. According to Bowie, modern critics and philosophers have tended to overlook the importance of Jacobi’s position with regard to the philosophy of the ego. I agree with his argument that Jacobi’s work of 1798-99 is fascinating – ‘startlingly prescient’, as Bowie puts it – when considered in relation to modern philosophy, but I would argue that Novalis was arriving at similar insights on his own (as in the ‘Kant-Studien’ and the ‘Fichte-Studien’ of 1795-96). I will not consider in detail Jacobi’s relation to Novalis because, apart from the fact that it would be difficult without further research into the intellectual climate in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, it would not really help to illuminate our comparison of Novalis and Derrida.

<sup>9</sup> N II, p. 269, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 566.

philosophy is simply a kind of *thinking*, albeit a particular type. Furthermore, the Novalis formulation, describing philosophy's ground as the *thinking of a ground*, both identifies the very goal of philosophy, especially in the eighteenth century, and hints at the difficulties attendant upon such a goal.

So we need to examine the search for this absolute ground. Philosophical systems of all kinds seek to provide a complete account of reality; to arrive at a final articulation of the truth as it corresponds to the world 'in itself'. However, for this to be a truly complete account, there must be a grounding principle or 'basic axiom' – in German, the 'Grundsatz'. The totality of the system depends on the positing of an unconditioned first principle, which requires no qualification and thus anchors the entire system. This grounding proposition, which Karl Leonhard Reinhold tried to establish in his *Elementarphilosophie*, realizing in the light of Descartes and Kant that it must be a 'proposition of consciousness', would be the absolute foundation of philosophy and the proposition from which all others could be deduced. Novalis's formulation is interesting when he says: 'Dem Philosophen liegt also ein Streben nach dem Denken *eines Grundes zum Grunde* [my emphasis].' It hints at the problem of infinite regress which always sabotages attempts to locate a beginning (or an end) of the chain of causality in which every cause is contingent upon a preceding one and so on *ad infinitum*. A questioning of this absolute foundation both informs the Derridean resistance to metaphysics and is central to the debate on the modernity of Romanticism. Two terms in particular, paradox and temporality, will lead us to the affinities between Novalis and Derrida. Manfred Frank, in several works, argues persuasively that, along with Friedrich Hölderlin, Novalis is the first thinker to reveal

clearly the radical temporality of the self. According to Frank, herein lies early Romanticism's unique contribution to modern philosophy. He says of Novalis's attempts to resolve the contradictions of the Fichtean system: 'Indem er nicht mit der Diagnose eines fundamentalen Problems in der Erstfassung von Fichtes Prinzip sich begnügt, sondern ein hochdifferenziertes Instrumentarium zu seiner Lösung erarbeitet, vermag er noch heutiger Bewußtseinstheorie gute Dienste zu leisten'.<sup>10</sup> So, since Fichte is a catalyst in the development of Novalis's thought, it is necessary to look at his engagement with Fichte's Transcendental Idealism before turning to Novalis's own account of the self and examining whether it can be said to bear witness to the Derridean perspective.

### **Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre***

For one of Novalis's contemporaries, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the ultimate founding principle of philosophy is the ego – the ego itself *is* the absolute. I said above that the proliferation of attempts in eighteenth-century philosophy to account for self-consciousness is inevitable in the light of Descartes and Kant. To put it briefly, the turn towards the subject can be seen in some ways as a response to the failure of previous philosophical systems to ground themselves. Fichte's Idealism is one attempt to address the perceived failings of Enlightenment philosophy – in essence, Cartesianism – which 'holds the necessities of thought evident in mathematics and

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<sup>10</sup> Manfred Frank, Gerhard Kurz, 'Ordo Inversus: Zu einer Reflexionsfigur bei Novalis, Hölderlin, Kleist und Kafka', in *Geist und Zeichen: Festschrift für Arthur Henkel* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1977), pp. 75-97 (p. 76). The sections on Novalis and Hölderlin are written by Frank. See also his book, *Das Problem 'Zeit' in der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung* (Münich: Winkler, 1972).

logic to be imbued in the very nature of things, so that the task of thinking is to construct the whole pattern of reality on the basis of these indisputable a priori foundations'.<sup>11</sup> Kant, rejecting the philosophy of Descartes and building on David Hume's questioning of causality, asserts that these foundations are located only in our way of seeing the world; they are necessities in thought, not in the world in itself. The fact that Fichte calls his philosophy of the ego the *Wissenschaftslehre* – usually translated as *The Science of Knowledge* – indicates that for him the ego is the key to all knowledge. And if Derrida recognizes that self-consciousness is the apparent underpinning of all values, as in the quotation with which I prefaced this chapter, Novalis puts it as follows: 'Wenn ich frage, was eine Sache ist, so frage ich nach ihrer Vorstellung und Anschauung – *ich* frage mich nur nach *mir selbst*.'<sup>12</sup>

The failure of Rationalism is, therefore, to a large extent what motivates both Kant and Fichte. In the empirical world of conditions, each cause depends on a prior cause and so on. Fichte, like Kant, seeking to escape this infinite regress, realizes that the thinking self cannot be of the same order as the world of conditions of which it is the cognitive condition of possibility. As Andrew Bowie puts it:

The fact is that it is contradictory to think that a complete account of the world in terms of scientific laws is absolute, unless consciousness could explain *itself* in a completely law-bound manner. The problem is that the explanation must be of the same kind used to explain a phenomenon of nature like any other, but the whole point of transcendental philosophy, which Fichte saw more clearly than anyone, is that the condition of possibility of grasping natural phenomena in terms of law cannot be itself of the same status as those phenomena.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bowie, p. 35-36.

<sup>12</sup> N II, p. 232, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 373.

<sup>13</sup> Bowie, p. 76.

In other words, how are we to account for the subject whose cognition gives meaning to the world ‘in itself’ *including* the subject’s place in this world? Novalis ponders this in typically brief fashion: ‘Kann ich ein Schema für mich suchen, da ich das Schematisierende bin?’<sup>14</sup> Here we are coming to the crux of Fichte’s main problem with Kant’s system. Indeed, it is very much Kant’s own problem, namely the need to resolve the apparent contradiction that the human subject is part of the world of appearances and yet at the same time is to be regarded as the subject whose cognitive activity gives this world meaning. Kant has trouble with this because, if the foundation of the self’s cognition is part of the world of appearances, moral freedom – and hence moral responsibility – is curtailed as we submit to a deterministic world-view. Kant, therefore, needs to take the step of describing the activity of the self as ‘unconditioned’. This frees it from the law-bound world of conditions where every action is caused by a condition which is in turn contingent upon a preceding one. Fichte’s solution, taking Kant’s thought even further, is to posit ‘das Absolute Ich’ (‘the Absolute Ego’) as the agent under which existence and knowledge, objectivity and subjectivity, matter and form, world and self, are synthesized. His ‘Grundsatz’, or first basic axiom, is that the absolute and self-identical I, as self-generating and spontaneous ‘Thathandlung’ (‘deed-action’), is the absolute ground from which the intelligibility of the world ensues and, as such, is free of the world of conditions and needs no further ground. It is its own ground:

[...] das Ich *ist*, und es *setzt* sein Seyn vermöge seines bloßen Seyns. – Es ist zugleich das Handelnde, und das Product der Handlung; das Thätige, und das, was durch die Thätigkeit hervorgebracht wird; Handlung und That sind Eins und ebendasselbe.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> N II, p. 252, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 469.

<sup>15</sup> J. G. Fichte, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by J. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845), vol. 1, p. 96.

Andrew Bowie notes that this conception appealed to the Romantics. But he also points out that, as we shall see when we turn to Novalis's 'Fichte-Studien', they were not without their reservations:

Despite their doubts about Fichte's conception, the Romantics were highly attracted by the sense that what Fichte was striving to understand, the I, as that which revealed nature, could not be understood in the objectifying terms which had dominated Western philosophical thinking's relationship to the natural world until this period. This soon led, in Schelling, Hölderlin, Schlegel and Novalis, to the notion that the I might best be understood by aesthetic means.<sup>16</sup>

### **The 'Fichte-Studien'**

Fichte's philosophy was to have an immediate impact on the young Novalis. As a student at Jena in the early 1790s, Novalis attended the lectures in which the philosopher expounded his *Wissenschaftslehre*. In studying the philosopher, Novalis engaged fully with the complexities of the Fichtean system and produced, as we shall see, the intricate outline of a solution to what he felt were its inadequacies. The tone of the 'Fichte-Studien' is very tentative. The caution with which Novalis proceeds reminds us that he is, at least initially, a disciple of Fichte's. However, he seems to grow in confidence throughout the studies and we are reminded of Derrida's admission of the difficulty of addressing or criticizing a teacher. As Derrida says of his relationship with his own former teacher, Michel Foucault:

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<sup>16</sup> Bowie, p. 42.



le disciple sait qu'il est seul à se trouver de ce fait déjà contesté par la voix du maître qui en lui précède la sienne. Il se sent indéfiniment contesté, ou récusé, ou accusé: comme disciple, il l'est par le maître qui parle en lui [...]; comme maître du dedans, il est donc contesté par le disciple qu'il est aussi. Ce malheur interminable du disciple tient peut-être à ce qu'il ne sait pas ou se cache encore que, comme la vraie vie, le maître est peut-être toujours absent.

Il faut donc briser la glace, ou plutôt le miroir, la réflexion, la spéculation infinie du disciple sur le maître. Et commencer à parler.<sup>17</sup>

Though he begins within Fichte's system, the engagement with his former teacher develops rapidly into the outline of Novalis's own version of self-consciousness. In the Fichtean system, the spontaneous 'Thathandlung' must be absolute and original. Fichte's Absolute Ego posits itself directly and is thus not given but self-generating – the absolute ground from which the intelligibility of the world ensues. 'Das Absolute Ich' is whole and self-identical, and even though Fichte defines the world as the 'Nicht Ich', i.e. everything which the ego is not, the Absolute Ego is not to be seen as dependent on its other but *vice versa*. Strictly speaking, the 'Nicht Ich' *does* define the 'Ich', but the ego is given priority over the world according to a hierarchical binary opposition familiar to us from the work of Derrida. We will consider in later chapters the way in which any opposition is motivated; one element is always held to be superior. But we will also see the surprising disorder revealed by deconstruction and the logic of supplementarity. For now though, we just need to recognize that for Fichte the world, in effect, is entirely subjugated by the ego – in fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that it is *assimilated* into the ego.

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 52.



Fichte's model of a self-positing ego neatly overcomes at the same time the problem of the necessarily *already split* ego of the traditional reflection-model – no self-consciousness without the ego both as reflecting subject and reflected object. The traditional reflection-model is unsatisfactory because it describes how the subject of self-consciousness reflects upon itself as its own object without sufficiently explaining the fact that, for this to be valid, the ego must already be acquainted with itself in order to recognize itself *as itself*. Fichte sees that the reflection cannot be regarded as the origin of self-consciousness because, as Novalis also maintains, '[w]as die Reflexion *findet*, *scheint* schon *da zu seyn*' [Novalis's italics].<sup>18</sup> Another consequence of the traditional model which Fichte seeks to avoid is the idea of infinite regress. The regress is inevitable because a self which is conscious of itself, which reflects on itself, would then also have to be conscious of itself *plus* the part which is conscious of itself, and so on. Fichte's solution is, in a way, breathtakingly simple. Why not begin with a self-consciousness which emerges along with the self? A conscious self which, because its Being is simultaneous and identical with its self-positing ('*es ist, und es setzt sich*'), is absolute, whole and self-identical. However, Novalis is troubled by precisely this aspect of the *Wissenschaftslehre* because it fails to account adequately for the foundation or cause of the self's knowledge of itself, or in other words, that the self *and* self-consciousness exist at all. Fichte actually founders on the Kantian problem he seeks to circumvent. As we saw above, the self, even without consciousness of itself, simply cannot be explained in the same objectifying terms as the empirical world of which it is the cognitive condition of possibility. As Manfred Frank puts it:

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<sup>18</sup> N II, p. 112, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 14.

In der Tätigkeit des Ich bleibt der Wissensgrund vom Wissen für die Reflexion unterschieden. Ohne einen unaktuiert in der Tiefe schlummernden Urgrund wäre das Wissen als sein Produkt nicht einmal frei zu postulieren. Dieser Urgrund kann nicht selber ins Bewußtsein fallen. [...] Das Ich kann seine Unbedingtheit nicht rechtfertigen aus seinem selbst bedingten Zustand.<sup>19</sup>

The following fragment of Novalis reads almost like a re-formulation of this point and reminds us of Bowie's point that consciousness cannot be explained in the same terms as that of which it is conscious – the 'Lernende' cannot be of the same order as the 'Gegenstand' which is learnt:

D[ie] Philosophie soll nicht mehr antworten, als sie gefragt wird. Hervorbringen kann sie nichts. [...] Sie handelt von einem Gegenstande, der nicht gelernt wird. Wir müssen aber alle Gegenstände lernen – Also von gar keinem Gegenstande. Was gelernt wird muß doch verschieden sein vom Lernenden. Was gelernt wird ist ein Gegenstand – also ist das Lernende kein Gegenstand. Könnte die Philosophie vielleicht vom Lernenden handeln, also von uns, wenn wir Gegenstände lernen? Die Philosophie ist aber selbst im Lernenden. Nun da wird die Selbstbetrachtung seyn. Ey! Wie fängt es der Lernende an sich selbst in dieser Operation zu belauschen. Er müßte sich also lernen – denn unter lernen verstehen wir überhaupt nichts, als den Gegenstand anschauen und ihn mit seinen Merckmale[n] uns einprägen. Es würde also wieder ein Gegenstand. Nein, Selbstbetrachtung kann sie nicht seyn, denn sonst wäre sie nicht das Verlangte. Es ist ein Selbstgefühl vielleicht.<sup>20</sup>

The above quotation sets out in a series of logical steps the problems facing philosophy's attempt to make an object of the ground of self-consciousness. Novalis uses the term 'lernen' (literally 'to learn') in the sense of 'to know objectively' or 'to intuit' ('den Gegenstand anschauen'). The salient point, as we saw above, is that the 'Lernende' cannot be of the same order as that which is learnt. Novalis then wonders

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<sup>19</sup> Frank, 'Die Philosophie des sogenannten "magischen Idealismus"', *Euphorion*, 63 (1969), 88-116 (91-92).

<sup>20</sup> N II, p. 113, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 15.

whether philosophy's task is to observe the human subject as it learns; to *learn* itself as it learns *itself* ('Er müßte sich also lernen'). But of course this would render the subject an object once more, and Novalis concludes that 'Selbstbetrachtung' cannot be the answer. How, Novalis asks with a little exclamation of frustration, can the subject listen to itself in the process of self-consciousness? 'Ey! Wie fängt es der Lernende an sich selbst in dieser Operation zu belauschen.' Interestingly, his terminology here is reminiscent of Derrida's description of Hegelian philosophy as 'the absolute desire to hear oneself speaking.' Andrew Bowie credits Derrida with 'one of the decisive moves in recent literary theory'<sup>21</sup> for the way in which he subverts this notion by demonstrating how the perfect reflection or self-mirroring inherent in the idea of 'hearing oneself speaking' is arrested and prevented by the means of signification one uses to do so. Bowie explains this in terms of the *différance* inherent in the chain of signification – one signifier being dependent on others with no ultimate access to a final positive meaning. He goes on to suggest that 'a related, though not identical, conception is central to thinking about literature in Romantic philosophy, where it emerges as a result of the links between the Spinozist ideas observed here and aspects of Kant's notion of the "free play" of the imagination in aesthetic experience.'<sup>22</sup> While I largely agree with Bowie on this point, and will return to the Romantics' idea of literature in the following chapter, I do not think we have to go as far as the idea of 'literature' to see how something similar to Derridean *différance* informs Novalis's reservations about the transparency of the subject to itself. At a more fundamental level, we shall see how the workings of representation and time prevent the neat and absolute reflection of hearing oneself

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<sup>21</sup> Bowie, p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

speaking or, as Novalis puts it above, ‘listening to oneself’ in the operation of self-consciousness. So, before proceeding to Novalis’s outline of self-consciousness, we must first look at *différance* and draw together some of the things which it attempts to name.

## Difference and *Différance*

*Différance* is a ‘neographism’ of Derrida’s – neographism because in French the difference between ‘différence’ and ‘différance’ can only be marked in writing, can, therefore, only be written or read, not spoken or heard. Derrida, insisting that it is neither a word nor a concept,<sup>23</sup> nevertheless undertakes a ‘semantic analysis’ of *différance* in the essay of the same name, published in *Marges de la philosophie*. In French, the verb ‘différer’ (from the Latin *differre*) has two distinct, though related, meanings. The first aspect of *différance* can be characterized as ‘la temporisation’ or deferral, and Derrida says: ‘Différer en ce sens, c’est temporiser, c’est recourir, consciemment ou inconsciemment, à la médiation temporelle et temporisatrice d’un détour suspendant l’accomplissement ou le remplissement du “désir” [...]’.<sup>24</sup> The second and more usual meaning has to do with difference, i.e., ‘ne pas être identique, être autre, discernable, etc.’<sup>25</sup> There is no gerund, no noun-verb, for either sense in French, and the noun ‘différence’ does not convey anything of the former sense, ‘to defer’. The ‘a’ of *différance* thus not only suspends the difference between ‘differ’ and ‘defer’ but also the difference between active and passive:

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 5-7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

ce qui se laisse désigner par 'différance' n'est ni simplement actif ni simplement passif [...] disant une opération qui n'est pas une opération, qui ne se laisse penser ni comme passion ni comme action d'un sujet sur un objet, ni à partir d'un agent ni à partir d'un patient, ni à partir ni en vue d'aucun de ces termes.<sup>26</sup>

Derrida first of all demonstrates how in the sense of deferral, *différance* is already implicit in the philosophical concept of the sign. Conventionally, a sign is already thought of in terms of deferral: it is proffered in the place of the no-longer-present thing or referent. This sign, then, deferring presence, is conceived only on the basis of the presence that it defers and is held to ensure *movement towards* the deferred presence that it seems to reappropriate; the absence is thus a modified presence. However, we shall soon see how both Derrida and Novalis complicate and displace the primacy of this presence. Pausing to note here the provisional and secondary character which this privileging of presence confers upon the sign in relation to the thing,<sup>27</sup> I am going to move straight on to the other aspect of *différance*. Derrida recalls Saussure's argument about the differences in the language-system: in language there are only differences. And, more importantly, while 'difference' generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up, in language there are only *differences without positive terms*.<sup>28</sup> Derrida says that what is written as 'différance':

ce sera donc le mouvement de jeu qui 'produit', par ce qui n'est pas simplement une activité, ces différences, ces effets de différence. Cela ne veut pas dire que la différence qui produit les différences soit avant elles, dans un présent simple et en soi immoifié, in-différent. La différence est

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> The secondariness of the sign will be important in Chapter 2, when we come to consider philosophy's dislike for writing.

<sup>28</sup> See Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 11.

l'‘origine’ non-pleine, son-simple, l'origine structurée et différante des différences. Le nom d'‘origine’ ne lui convient donc plus.<sup>29</sup>

*Différance* is what subverts attempts to objectify the absolute. Derrida and Levinas, like Novalis, are very much aware that knowledge of (consciousness of) something is not possible without objectification and representation. Derrida reminds us that it has often been argued that ‘une philosophie de la conscience était toujours philosophie de l’objet’.<sup>30</sup> Consciousness requires an object, a ‘Gegenstand’. (The German word expresses well the idea of standing opposite; the accusative.) But once again we are faced with this question: where does this take account of the subject which reflects on or posits itself as object? Because he seeks to solve this problem simply by positing an Absolute Ego which is generated simultaneously along with the awareness of itself, Fichte’s absolute and spontaneous ‘Thathandlung’ is a mere tautology, an ultimately meaningless circle. This is essentially where Novalis begins to depart from Fichte’s system. To look at it another way, Novalis objects to the inconsistency involved in describing the self-positing of the ego as an *absolute action*. The absolute foundation of philosophy cannot be of the order of an action – an action which, of course, takes place in time. Manfred Frank pinpoints the problem:

Die Urhandlung, in der sich das seiner bewußte Ich losreißt aus seiner unvordenklichen Einheit und in Differenz zu seinem Sein setzt, *kann* nicht Prinzip der Philosophie sein. Die Philosophie, deren erster Schritt die Fundierung des Endlichen als eines Endlichen ist, genügt dem eignen Anspruch nicht, unbedingt zu beginnen.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Frank, *Das Problem ‘Zeit’*, p. 22.

And Novalis, even more succinctly, points out that any absolute foundation would have to be eternal and immutable – he calls it the ‘Augenblick, der das ewige Universum umfaßt’.<sup>32</sup> As we shall see more clearly later in the chapter, the absolute cannot be subject to the essential difference – in the sense of differing from itself which constitutes the movement of time. The philosophical implications of Novalis’s insights are far-reaching and, indeed, have continued to be articulated in modern philosophy and literary theory. For example, taking Andrew Bowie’s description of Hegel’s system as ‘the most emphatic and totalising form of “self-presence”’,<sup>33</sup> we see how Novalis’s acknowledgement of the temporality of self-consciousness leads inevitably to the questioning of the concept of ‘presence’ in the same way that Derridean *différance* undermines a Hegelian desire for One philosophy. It would seem that the very idea of time is an unwelcome one for any philosopher who seeks to fix a system, to give it a permanent and absolute foundation and an ultimate goal. But, initially, Novalis’s engagement with Fichte starts with an apparently small phrase – the logical proposition referred to as the ‘proposition of identity’.

Novalis begins, like Fichte, with the proposition of identity, but where Fichte sees the self-identical, Novalis sees only difference. For Fichte ‘a ist a’ is the expression of the ego’s original and absolute unity (‘Ich = Ich’). Here Fichte uses the seemingly irrefutable logic of grammar to guarantee the self-identity of the ego. As he describes it, the simultaneity of being and self-positing means that the absolute ego is whole and self-identical in and for consciousness. And because of both its accessibility to consciousness *and* the fact that it is what it is (‘a ist a’), the Absolute

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<sup>32</sup> N II, p. 267, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 556.

<sup>33</sup> Bowie, p. 43.



Ego can, according to Fichte, legitimately be the grounding proposition of philosophy. But Novalis sees the problem with this proposition immediately:

In dem Satz *a ist a* liegt nichts als ein Setzen, Unterscheiden und verbinden. Es ist ein philosophischer Parallelismus. Um *a* deutlicher zu machen wird *A* getheilt. *Ist* wird als allgemeiner Gehalt, *a* als bestimmte Form aufgestellt. Das Wesen der Identität läßt sich nur in einen *Scheinsatz* aufstellen.<sup>34</sup>

Novalis rightly realizes that the very act of equating ('gleichsetzen') always already implies difference and is thus the expression of a merely *relative* identity. The original absolute and singular identity of 'a' cannot be expressed in the proposition 'a ist a', which is only a pseudoproposition – Novalis calls it a 'Scheinsatz.' Expressed in terms of self-consciousness, the philosophical proposition 'Ich = Ich' cannot possibly convey the one-ness of the ego before consciousness. What we are dealing with here, with the word 'ist', is precisely the kind of philosophical, propositional language called into question by both Levinas and Derrida. As Simon Critchley puts it, 'the primacy of the third person present indicative of the copula in predicative propositions – S is P – is one of the principal targets of deconstruction.'<sup>35</sup> Such language rests on what Heidegger termed the ontological difference – the forgotten question of Being. It is my contention that the importance of Novalis for modern literary-theoretical positions lies in his recognition that the concept of equating consists in representation; and representation always already involves difference. In this, I do not in any way contradict Manfred Frank's insistence that Novalis's work on the radical temporality of the self constitutes his major contribution to modern

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<sup>34</sup> N II, p. 104, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Critchley, p. 2.



thought. As we shall see, the intervention of representation in self-consciousness involves *différance*: deferral as much as difference.

### **The *Ordo Inversus***

Frank has done perhaps more than any other critic to identify Novalis's unique solution to the problem of self-consciousness. It hangs on the interplay between what Novalis calls in the above quotation 'Selbstbetrachtung' (sometimes 'Reflexion') and 'Selbstgefühl' (or simply 'Gefühl') – an interplay which takes place in time and in which, as we shall see, neither term can be given precedence. Frank has pointed out that scholarship has been slow to appreciate the originality of Novalis's solution due to a certain confusion over terminology. *Ordo inversus* is the term which Frank lifts from the 'Fichte-Studien' as best describing Hardenberg's model, but as he says, Novalis was apparently very taken with this figure of inversion and throughout his life continued to work it out with varying terminology, at times borrowing heavily from Fichte, which only serves to obfuscate the nature of the actual departure from Fichte.

Novalis's answer to the doubly irritating reflection model is a 'nicht thetisches Bewußtsein',<sup>36</sup> a non-positing consciousness, which as such does not take or posit itself as an object upon which it reflects but which *does* enjoy an absolute identity, an original one-ness with itself. This state of one-ness is referred to by

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<sup>36</sup> Frank, 'Ordo Inversus', p. 76.

Novalis as the ‘Zustand’ and the only relation the subject can have to this pre-reflexive state is in the form of a feeling, a ‘Selbstgefühl’. As we have seen, the ‘setzen, unterscheiden und verbinden’ necessary for consciousness to know itself as represented object means that this state of one-ness cannot possibly be a direct object of consciousness. Consciousness cannot ‘*learn*’ itself because, as we have seen, Novalis contends that learning is ‘den Gegenstand anschauen’ and, as a consequence, ‘[es] würde wieder ein Gegenstand’. Here we see once more the importance of the word ‘Schein’ for Novalis. (This term, which de Man, as we saw, translates as ‘fiction’, can mean shine, reflection or appearance. Unfortunately, it loses some of its semantic plurality in English.) ‘Das Wesen der Identität läßt sich nur in einen Scheinsatz aufstellen. Wir verlassen das *Identische* um es darzustellen’ [Novalis’s italics].<sup>37</sup> We cannot *know* the pre-reflexive ‘Zustand’. As Novalis puts it: ‘Die Grenzen des Gefühls sind die Grenzen der Philosophie. Das Gefühl kann sich nicht selber fühlen.’<sup>38</sup>

One might wonder at this point whether Novalis is according the ‘Selbstgefühl’ the status of an absolute, in effect replacing Fichte’s Absolute Ego with another absolute. However, and this is vitally important, the ‘Selbstgefühl’, unlike the Fichtean Absolute Ego, is not absolutely original, autonomous or spontaneous. It is, rather, contingent, the ‘*Resultat* [my italics]’,<sup>39</sup> of an absolute cause which always already escapes it. (By ‘absolute cause’ I mean here absolutely other, inaccessible to consciousness, thought and philosophical discourse.) As a pre-reflexive state which does not posit or thematize itself (in other words, as non-

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<sup>37</sup> N II, p. 104, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 114, no. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 107, no. 3.

knowledge), this pure 'feeling' must remain inaccessible until it is reflected. But as soon as this happens it becomes nothing more than the reflection (and thus the non-being) of the pure-being-itself or one-ness of the 'Zustand'. The identity-with-itself-only of the 'Zustand' is transformed by reflection into an identity which is only relative in the same way that the mirror image is only ever relatively identical to the original – it is an identity marked by difference. This necessary intervention of representation utterly precludes knowledge of the absolute self-identity of the self which it possesses in the pre-reflexive 'Zustand'. Now the connection with Levinas's and Derrida's 'tout-autre' is becoming clearer. To reiterate the point I made above: without directly equating the absolute with the totally-other, a comparison of how Novalis and Derrida *approach* these is interesting and, for my purposes, necessary. It helps illuminate the significance of the 'Fichte-Studien' for literary theory today. Only what Derrida terms a 'violent' metaphysics would attempt to assimilate the very alterity of this pre-reflexive 'Zustand'. In this sense, and without trying to put a superficial Derridean spin on Novalis, I would say that Novalis's awareness of the ungraspability of the 'Zustand' is precisely the same as that which informs Derrida's insistence that there is a 'tout-autre' – an Other which cannot be made the object of philosophy.

## ‘Ein Bild des Seyns im Seyn’

In the speculative tone characteristic of the ‘Fichte-Studien’, Novalis wonders:

Das Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn.  
Was ist aber das?  
Das Außer dem Seyn muß kein rechtes Seyn seyn.  
Ein unrechtes Seyn außer dem Seyn ist ein Bild – Also muß jenes außer dem  
Seyn ein Bild des Seyns im Seyn seyn.  
D[as] Bewußtseyn ist folglich ein Bild des Seyns im Seyn.<sup>40</sup>

We need to keep in mind here that what Novalis refers to in the above quotation as ‘Seyn’ refers specifically (and only) to the being of the ego *in and for* consciousness. The term ‘Seyn’ is by no means to be confused with what Novalis calls ‘Nur Seyn’, or sometimes ‘Chaos’. This ‘Nur Seyn’ is the being-of-the-ego-for-itself *plus* its Being – the pre-reflexive ‘Zustand’. The ‘Zustand’ is not directly accessible to consciousness but it gives rise to consciousness; it is the always already lost origin of self-consciousness. That which is accessible to thought, to discourse, to philosophy (i.e., ‘im Seyn’) always already bears the trace of representation. Without the objectification made possible by the substituting sign, nothing would *seem* to be presented to consciousness. There would be, in effect, no self-consciousness. Novalis says: ‘*Deutlich* wird etwas nur durch Repraesentation’.<sup>41</sup> Signs intervene. Or, rather, we can say that signs and substitutions are what make up the functioning of the ego. They open up the possibility of self-consciousness and, as we shall see when we come to Derrida’s reading of Plato in the following chapter, it is only from signs and supplements that ‘living’ memory emerges.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 106, no. 2.

<sup>41</sup> N III, p. 246, ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 49.

Novalis goes on to point out the need for a closer examination of the role of signs:

Nähere Erklärung des Bildes. /Zeichen/ Theorie des Zeichens. / Theorie der Darstellung oder des Nichtseyns im Seyn, um das Seyn für sich *auf gewisse Weise daseyn* zu lassen/ Theorie des Raums und der Zeit beym Bilde.<sup>42</sup>

Later in the 'Fichte-Studien', he begins to relate this demand for a theory of the sign specifically to language. Indeed, John Neubauer identifies the topic of 'Sprache' as another fruitful area for a comparison of Novalis and postmodernism. We will have cause in the following chapter to look more closely at Novalis's reflections on language as sign-system in the 'Fichte-Studien' and in other works, both theoretical and more overtly 'literary'. We will also look at philosophy and poetry as different types of writing and examine the ways Western philosophy has treated them in relation to memory and self-consciousness. For now though we will consider representation in a more general sense and examine the role it plays in Novalis's version of self-consciousness. This will help set the scene for the history of truth which Derrida sees as playing itself out between Plato and Mallarmé. We will find that the idea of representation cannot be separated from the history of truth.

Frank, in the article written with Kurz on the *ordo inversus* as it appears in Novalis, Hölderlin, Kafka and Kleist, has written a very clear summary of some of the more complex aspects of the 'Fichte-Studien'. He sketches Novalis's solution to the problem that Being cannot be directly represented – and yet is 'in a certain way' accessible to the subject – as follows. It is thanks to a double reflection which

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<sup>42</sup> N II, p. 106, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 2.

cancels out the non-Being of the reflected 'Zustand' and transforms it once more into Being for and in consciousness. The subject reflects upon what is actually itself a reflection:

Von der je schon geschehenen Uroffenbarung im Gefühl (*Resultat*) auf sich selbst als Thematisierung derselben zurückbiegend, negiert die Reflexion jene Verkehrung und stellt die Wahrheit negativ als ein Resultat her, das auf das erste Resultat scheinbar paradox als auf eine tatsächliche *Voraussetzung* aufbaut. Natürlich verwandelt die Darstellung das Sein zunächst nur in *sein Nichtseyn*, (...) [*in*] ein *Nichtidentisches* (104).<sup>43</sup>

So what the subject perceives as happening in consciousness is the reverse of what actually happens. Frank regards this double reflection as a variation on the Fichtean law of reflection by which we can think something only by first thinking that which it is not. But the Fichtean ego, although split into subject and object, grasps cognitively and gives meaning to that which it is not ('Nicht Ich'). This primacy of the 'Ich' – along with the subsequent subjugation of the 'Nicht Ich' – is, in effect, the return of the other to the same. The absolute and original identity of the ego remains intact. But the Novalissian ego is always already marked by a radical alterity, a difference with itself with no possibility of even momentary self-identity. Where Fichte's Absolute Ego assimilates the 'Nicht-Ich', Novalis's 'Zustand' is necessarily transformed into non-being, appearance, 'Schein', in order for it to be at all accessible to the subject of consciousness. The double reflection only apparently transforms it once more into Being – this is why what the subject finds '*scheint schon da zu seyn*'.<sup>44</sup> So, and this is the consequence of this departure from Fichte, for Novalis feeling and reflection only coincide on an abstract level – in thought or in

<sup>43</sup> Frank, 'Ordo inversus', p. 77. References in brackets are to the critical edition of Novalis (N II).

<sup>44</sup> N II, p. 112, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 14.

philosophy. Yet, at this point, we might still be wondering whether this internal difference is not merely what Derrida and Levinas refer to as ‘the play of the same’. Derrida says: ‘Le moi est le même. L’altérité ou la négativité intérieure au moi, la différence intérieure n’est qu’une apparence: une *illusion*, un “jeu du Même” [...]’.<sup>45</sup> Pausing to note that Derrida, too, recognizes the role of illusion (what Novalis calls ‘Schein’) in the functioning of self-consciousness, we now need to try to draw out the aspect of Novalis’s outline which demonstrates his respect for the total otherness of the absolute.

## The Double Bind

In Fichte’s version, the ‘Nicht-Ich’, while it is certainly other than the empirical ‘Ich’, loses its alterity by being assimilated into the transcendental Absolute Ego. The Absolute Ego knows (grasps cognitively; understands) both ego and world. But for Novalis, self-consciousness is a process, which he refers to as the ‘Rollentausch’ – a to-ing and fro-ing or ‘Wechselwirkung’<sup>46</sup> – between subjective and objective moments, between knowledge (non-Being) and non-knowledge (Being), between ‘Reflexion’ and ‘Gefühl’, whose figure is that of the ‘double bind’. The self-conscious ego is also termed ‘analytisches Ich’ by Novalis, but due to the logic of temporality, the analytical ego cannot be conscious of itself in the moment that it is

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, p. 139.

<sup>46</sup> Novalis uses the terms ‘Wechselwirkung’ and ‘wechselseitig’ frequently in the ‘Fichte-Studien’. At times, these refer to problems of communication and ‘transmission’ of meaning between human subjects. But it is used explicitly to refer to the to-and-fro movement between reflection and feeling in self-consciousness. See in particular N II, pp. 117-19, where he also speaks of the ‘Hin und her Direction’ (p. 117).



the ego. It can only be conscious of the represented ego, the reflection of ego.

‘Synthetisches Ich’ would be the identity of self and self-consciousness (the ‘Zustand’) but this is not available in and for the ego. Novalis puts it like this:

Analytisches Ich ist Ich mit Bewußtseyn – synthetisches Ich, ohne Bewußtseyn. Im Synthetischen Ich schaut sich das analytische Ich an. [...] Das analytische Ich wechselt wieder mit sich selbst – wie das Ich schlechthin – in der Anschauung – Es wechselt Bild und Seyn. Das Bild ist immer das verkehrte vom Seyn.<sup>47</sup>

True coincidence of the analytical ego and the synthetic ego is utterly impossible. Impossible because, the double reflection notwithstanding, the ‘always already’ of separation and representation means that the entire process by which the self attains consciousness of itself is exactly that – a *process*, an ever-changing dynamic which is part of the flow of time. The following description from Novalis re-formulates and further elucidates the entire problematic:

Reflectirt das Subject aufs reine Ich – so hat es nichts – indem es was für sich hat – reflectirt es hingegen nicht darauf – so hat es für sich nichts, indem es was hat.<sup>48</sup>

This beautifully concise statement describes an aporia: it is a version of what Derrida calls a ‘double bind’ (the term always appears in English in his texts). The ‘Zustand’ (the pre-reflexive state of one-ness) is only there when the subject refrains from reflecting on itself, but in this moment of pure identity the self is non-knowledge, i.e., not graspable by either consciousness or philosophy. And when the subject

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<sup>47</sup> N II, p.142, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 63.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp.137-38, no. 49.



knows itself, makes an object of itself, the content actually escapes it thanks to the double-reflection of the *ordo inversus* – the subject's gaze believes it is meeting *something*, but it is merely meeting a reflection. Non-Being reflected back into Being may appear the same, the right way up and the right way round, but it is still Being transformed by representation into appearance or 'Schein'. Thinking, which is of the same order as philosophy, cannot do without representation. Novalis says: 'Alles Denken ist also eine Kunst des Scheins.'<sup>49</sup> Later on in the 'Fichte-Studien', he says: 'Denken der Ausdruck/die Äußerung/ des Nicht-Seyns.'<sup>50</sup> In as much as it may be said to be a ground (in philosophy's sense) the self's ground is its Being, but it always already escapes the thinking, reflecting subject. 'Paradox' is Novalis's term for the aporia of self-consciousness and its relation to the absolute. Derrida uses the word paradox but more frequently speaks of 'the aporia', 'the impossible possible', or the 'double bind'. Time, as Manfred Frank puts it, is the 'Ursprungsdimension des Bewußtseins'.<sup>51</sup> And there is no paradox without time.

Indeed, time and paradox cannot be thought separately, as the following quotation from Derrida suggests:

Cette formulation du paradoxe et de l'impossible en appelle donc à une figure qui ressemble à une structure de la temporalité, à une dissociation instantanée du présent, à une différance dans l'être avec soi du présent [...].<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.181, no. 234.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.146, no. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Frank, *Das Problem 'Zeit'*, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Apories* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), pp. 38-39.

Despite the complexities of Novalis's account of self-consciousness, we can pinpoint the difference with Fichte fairly succinctly – because of the original *différance* from which self-consciousness emerges, the self is never present to itself. To put it in the simplest terms, the empirical subject *is not* that upon which it feels itself to be dependent. Manfred Frank describes the original self-identity of the ego (Novalis's 'Synthetisches Ich' or 'Nur Seyn') as 'das Sein an sich' or 'die Identität ihres Bewußtseins und ihres Seins'. He says:

Diese Identität, die der Grundsatz der Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus gewesen ist, wird dem Bewußtsein zur 'regulativen Idee,' an deren Unerreichbarkeit es verzweifelt und die, ewig vorschwebend, ewig verfehlt wird.<sup>53</sup>

Due to the aporetic or temporal structure of consciousness, the subject can never enjoy the absolute unity of self, but thanks to the thematization of the 'Selbstgefühl' (through which the one-ness of the 'Zustand' is experienced as past) the self never ceases trying to supplement this lack of being and the sought-after absolute identity remains ever *future*. Time, bearing as it does the trace of both past and future, is the expression both of the lack inherent in the ego *and* of the possibility of its fulfilment. This is why the idea of never-ending 'Streben' is so central to Romanticism. We shall see in Chapter 3 how this eternal striving towards the absolute underlies the Romantics' predilection for the fragmentary. And the final chapter deals with our relationships with others, and examines ways in which Novalis and Derrida articulate the paradoxical relationship between separation (or lack) and never-ending desire.

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<sup>53</sup> Frank, *Das Problem 'Zeit'*, p. 17.

Derrida, in many of his works, demonstrates how the present, like the self, is condemned to this impossible-possible aporetic structure, the structure of a Catch-22 or of the double bind. Like the Novalissian self, the now *is and is not* what it is: ‘Le maintenant est mais il n’est pas ce qu’il est. Plus précisément, il n’est ce qu’il est que “faiblement” (*amudrôs*). En tant qu’il a été, il n’est plus. Mais en tant qu’il sera, comme l’avenir ou la mort [...], il n’est pas encore.’<sup>54</sup> Fichte cannot allow for time in his attempt to fix self-consciousness in a static opposition between subject and object, self and non-self, in the Absolute Ego. Ironically, his attempt to fix the absolute actually fails to respect its otherness. The paradoxes which structure self-consciousness in Novalis’s version reveal that, for him, the difference in the ego is not merely the play of the same. If everything in Fichte’s system is founded on the absolute ego, then he has colluded in what Derrida terms a ‘philosophy of light’: ‘Tout ce qui m’est donné dans la lumière paraît m’être donné à moi-même par moi-même.’<sup>55</sup> But the one thing I cannot give myself is time. Levinas, Derrida and Novalis all recognize that this philosophy of light and unity is a philosophy of a world without time: ‘philosophie d’un monde de la lumière, d’un monde sans temps’.<sup>56</sup> Novalis says:

Die Zeit kann nie aufhören – *Wegdenken* können wir die Zeit nicht – denn die Zeit ist ja Bedingung des denkenden Wesens – die Zeit hört nur mit dem Denken auf. Denken außer der Zeit ist ein Unding’.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Apories*, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, p. 136.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>57</sup> N II, p. 269, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 564.

And, as Derrida puts it, '[...] la simple conscience interne ne saurait, sans l'irruption du tout-autre, se donner le temps et l'altérité absolu des instants, de même le moi ne peut engendrer en soi l'altérité sans la rencontre d'autrui.'<sup>58</sup> Derrida has often reflected on the way in which the two common-sense meanings of 'present' – both 'present' as in 'not absent' and as in 'now' – are inextricably linked. Both are based on the assumption that something 'is-here-in-this-moment.' So, in a way, qualifying 'the present' with 'in the temporal sense' is a tautology. However, it is useful to do so in order to emphasize the way in which *différance* prevents self-presence. The self for Novalis, then, like the present in the temporal sense, is never present to itself and the absolute remains forever out of reach, but were this not the case there would be neither empirical self nor philosophy. Indeed, Frank sees these as being of the same order as temporality: 'wo immer Philosophieren ist, ist demnach empirisches Ich, Geist und Zeitlichkeit.'<sup>59</sup> As we will see more clearly in the chapter on the death of the other, there would be no desire either. The absolute, the firm foundation of self-consciousness cannot be *thought*. It is beyond the reach of philosophy and yet we cannot do without it.

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<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 140.

<sup>59</sup> Frank, 'Die Philosophie des sogenannten "magischen Idealismus"', p. 93.

## The Absolute

All of this exemplifies what is perhaps the most important similarity between Novalis and Derrida: their attitude towards questions of the absolute in general. Novalis's outline of the temporal structure of self-consciousness has revealed the problematic nature of the concept of any absolute. Indeed, the 'Fichte-Studien' are interspersed with reflections on the concept of the absolute; in connection with its relation to the subject, but also with implications reaching beyond the self towards philosophy in its other domains and concerns.

In the most basic terms – and Novalis is fully aware of this – the very phrase 'any absolute' is highly problematic. By its very nature, the absolute must be One, a totality, which renders all qualifying adjectives redundant. Novalis says: '*Nur das All ist absolut.*'<sup>60</sup> Derrida, in 'La violence et la métaphysique', reflects on the inability of language, even in the form of metaphor, to accommodate the absolute. Considering Levinas's use of the (religious) expression 'le très-haut' ('the most high'), he says that this expression:

déchire, par l'excès superlatif, la lettre spatiale de la métaphore. Si haute qu'elle soit, la hauteur est toujours accessible; le très-haut, lui, est plus haut que la hauteur. Aucun accroissement de hauteur ne saurait le mesurer. Il n'appartient pas à l'espace, il n'est pas du monde.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> N II, p. 247, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 454.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 139.

Novalis's friend and fellow literary theorist, Friedrich Schlegel, also uses the example of superlatives to demonstrate the logical impossibility of rendering the absolute into discursivity:

Ein höchstes Häßliches [ist] offenbar so wenig möglich wie ein höchstes Schönes. Ein unbedingtes Maximum der Negation, oder das absolute Nichts kann so wenig wie ein unbedingtes Maximum der Position in irgendeiner Vorstellung gegeben werden.<sup>62</sup>

In the 'Fichte-Studien', the empirical ego is of the same order as language. If the 'most high' always exceeds the metaphor, Novalis shows how the Being of the ego always already exceeds the consciousness of itself. We saw above that he names the absolute ground of self-consciousness 'Nur Seyn' (i.e., the very Being of the ego or the identity of self and self-consciousness). As I stressed above, this 'Nur Seyn' is not the same as 'Seyn' which refers to being (with a small 'b') in and for the empirical ego. The whole point about this 'Nur Seyn' – which Novalis also terms 'Chaos' or 'das bloße Wesen' – is that it cannot be an object of consciousness. It has always already escaped consciousness. Novalis is adamant that '[d]as *bloße* Wesen ist nicht erkennbar'<sup>63</sup> and, being inaccessible to discourse, it has no need of qualification. He recognizes at the very start of the 'Fichte-Studien' that the question of the absolute has philosophical implications beyond the problem of self-consciousness:

An dem Nur Seyn haftet gar keine Modification, kein Begriff – man kann ihm nichts entgegensetzen – als verbaliter das Nichtseyn. Dis ist aber ein

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<sup>62</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-), vol. I, p. 313.

<sup>63</sup> N II, p. 240, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 440.

copulirendes Häckchen, was blos pro Forma dran gehängt wird – Es scheint nur so. Greift doch eine Handvoll Finsternis.[...] Hier bleibt die Philosophie stehn und muß stehn bleiben – denn darin besteht gerade das Leben, das es nicht begriffen werden kann. Nur aufs *Seyn* kann alle Philosophie gehn.<sup>64</sup>

This quotation is very important. Not only does it articulate a recurring theme of the ‘Fichte-Studien’, namely that the absolute is inaccessible to discourse, but also there are linguistic resonances with Derrida’s reflections on the relation between philosophy and the absolute. In the essay on Levinas, Derrida describes as violent philosophy’s need to know – to grasp – the absolute. The German verb ‘begreifen’ has the same semantic plurality as the English ‘to grasp’: it means both ‘to understand’ and ‘to appropriate; to take (by force)’. But Derrida, although he does not entirely identify himself with Levinas throughout the whole essay, is very close to him on this point and quotes him: ‘Si on pouvait posséder, saisir et connaître l’autre, il ne serait pas l’autre. Posséder, connaître, saisir sont des synonymes de pouvoir.’<sup>65</sup> Novalis recognizes that this need to grasp is not only futile but also, he implies, simply not the task of philosophy: ‘Hier bleibt die Philosophie stehen und muß stehen bleiben [...]’ A philosophy of light cannot grasp ‘a handful of darkness.’

## **Derrida, Foucault and the History of Madness**

We saw above that knowledge of something always involves objectification. What Derrida and Novalis demonstrate is that this concept of an object presented to the theoretical gaze cannot accommodate our apprehension of the absolute – and I would

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-07, no. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Le temps et l’autre*. Cited by Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, p. 136.

argue that this applies equally to the Levinasian 'tout-autre'. Another essay in *L'écriture et la différence*, 'Cogito et histoire de la folie', condenses these problems using a very specific example which provides us with a slightly different perspective. Derrida examines the difficulties encountered by Michel Foucault in his attempt to write a history of madness in terms of its exclusion by reason. I am not suggesting that we can simply regard as identical the absolute, the 'tout-autre' or madness. However, Derrida's reading of Foucault demonstrates in a different way the difficulty of rendering into discourse something the very otherness of which one wishes (and needs) to respect and maintain. In 'Cogito', Derrida describes madness as 'the other of a language'; specifically, of the language of reason. As he himself puts it, Foucault's project is to write a history of madness in which madness speaks (for) itself. He does not want to write *on* madness in the objectifying language of reason and psychiatry. Foucault's attempt to write an archaeology of madness is a good illustration of the way in which Derrida regards the concept of the other which is not to be confused with the totally-other (the Other). We can say that the language of reason would like to assimilate and tame its other with its discourse. Critchley speaks of 'domesticating'<sup>66</sup> the Other, and in a formulation reminiscent of the way Novalis and Frank express it says: 'The activity of philosophy, the very task of thinking, is the reduction of otherness. In seeking to think the other, its otherness is reduced or appropriated to our understanding.'<sup>67</sup> The whole point about the *totally*-other is that it cannot be tamed. If this seems contradictory, our examination in Chapter 2 of writing as the 'other' of philosophy will show how this binary opposition can be deconstructed and yet not so neatly dismantled as to result in the

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<sup>66</sup> Critchley, p. 29.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



return of the other to the same. To put it another way, if the discourse of reason and psychiatry were to fully explain madness, it could no longer be said to be *other* than this discourse. But how, then, can the otherness of this other be respected? Entering into a dialogue with his former teacher, Michel Foucault, with the attendant difficulties of addressing a mentor which I mentioned above, Derrida goes on to consider Foucault's undertaking and to explain what he means by its 'infeasibility'.

Foucault describes his project in terms of silence, the silence of a madness denied a voice: 'Le langage de la psychiatrie, qui est monologue de la raison *sur* la folie n'a pu s'établir que sur un tel silence. Je n'ai voulu faire l'histoire de ce langage; plutôt l'archéologie de ce silence.'<sup>68</sup> However, Derrida's response to this is to ask whether a history of silence is at all possible. Remarking that Foucault describes the fate of madness using terms from 'la zone juridique de l'interdiction',<sup>69</sup> Derrida wonders whether such an archaeology of silence could be anything other than the restoration of the very order which seeks to exclude madness. Would it not merely be 'le recommencement le plus efficace, le plus subtil, la *répétition*, au sens le plus irréductiblement ambigu de ce mot, de l'acte perpétré contre la folie, et ce dans le moment même où il est dénoncé?'<sup>70</sup> He reminds us that this impossibility sabotages every attempt to objectify a silence – and not just the silence which is madness – in the language of which it is the other. This is worth quoting in full because it elucidates not only the question of the cognitive appropriation of the absolutely other but also the implications of the problem encountered by any deconstructive reading; namely, how to locate the point of alterity from which to

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<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, pp. x-xi. Cited by Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 57.

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 57.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

interrogate a tradition when the only means at one's disposal are the very terms and concepts of that tradition:

*Tout* notre langage européen, le langage de tout ce qui a participé, de près ou de loin, à l'aventure de la raison occidentale, est l'immense délégation du projet que Foucault définit sous l'espèce de la capture ou l'objectivation de la folie. *Rien* dans ce langage et *personne* parmi ceux qui le parlent ne peut échapper à la culpabilité historique – s'il y en a une et si elle est historique en un sens classique – dont Foucault semble vouloir faire le procès. Mais c'est peut-être un procès impossible car l'instruction et le verdict réitèrent sans cesse le crime par le simple fait de leur élocution. Si l'*Ordre* dont nous parlons est si puissant, si sa puissance est unique en son genre, c'est précisément par son caractère sur-déterminant et par l'universelle, la structurale, l'universelle et infinie complicité en laquelle il compromet tous ceux qui l'entendent en son langage, quand même celui-ci leur procure encore la forme de leur dénonciation. L'ordre alors est dénoncé dans l'ordre.<sup>71</sup>

### **Paradox: The Impossible Possible**

The problems Foucault encounters in trying to write an archaeology of silence are symptomatic of philosophy's relation to the absolute. If the absolute, which in terms of the 'Fichte-Studien' is the Being of the ego, were accessible to philosophy, it would not *be* the absolute. Novalis, as we saw, recognizes that this is where philosophy stops and must remain. But this is not a simple admission of defeat. While making it clear that the absolutely other is inaccessible to discourse, both Novalis and Derrida see nevertheless the possibility of a *certain* relation with the other. This quotation from Derrida brings together the entire problematic of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

conceptualizing – i.e., rendering into philosophical discursivity – the absolutely-other while revealing the necessity of this impossibility. But it is an impossibility which begins to open up a *possibility* – the possibility of some kind of encounter with the other:

Quelle est donc cette rencontre de l'absolument-autre? Ni représentation, ni limitation, ni relation conceptuelle au même. Le moi et l'autre ne se laissent pas surplomber, ne se laissent pas totaliser par un concept de relation. Et d'abord parce que le concept (matière du langage), toujours *donné à l'autre*, ne peut se fermer sur l'autre, le comprendre. La dimension dative ou vocative ouvrant la direction originaire du langage, elle ne saurait sans violence se laisser comprendre et modifier dans la dimension accusative ou attributive de l'objet. Le langage ne peut donc totaliser sa propre possibilité et *comprendre* en soi sa propre origine ou sa propre fin.<sup>72</sup>

As we shall see, we are speaking here of the only possible relation: a non-violent relation which respects the absolute alterity of the Other.

Let us return for a moment to 'Cogito et histoire de la folie.' For Foucault does manage to write his impossible book. In order to do so, he has to practice a kind of double writing, believing in the possibility of writing an archaeology of silence while being aware, at the same time, of the impossibility of the undertaking. This can be applied to all deconstructive readings and Derrida, in his more explicit statements on deconstruction, has often described it as a double reading. This is where Manfred Frank's description of the function and role of the absolute in Novalis's account of self-consciousness emphasizes the negative a little too much at the expense of the paradoxical double movement. Frank, describing Novalis's 'Nur Seyn' as 'das Sein

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 140-41.

an sich', says that it functions as a regulatory idea 'an deren Unerreichbarkeit es verzweifelt und die, ewig vorschwebend, ewig verfehlt wird'.<sup>73</sup> He is quite right to emphasize the 'Unerreichbarkeit' of the state of absolute identity but the word 'verzweifelt' does not do justice to the paradoxical attitude to the absolute which is explicit in Novalis. Possessing the absolute would totally destroy its absolute otherness, assimilating it into the light of the same. Derrida and Levinas liken this problem of philosophy's attempts to grasp the absolute to our relation to human others, and we can begin to see how this demand for the respect of others has ethical implications. For Derrida, that which escapes objectification and knowledge manifests itself as a *certain* absence. We cannot speak *of* the absolutely-other, only *to* it. Vocative, then, not accusative:

Dans le visage, l'autre se livre en personne *comme autre*, c'est-à-dire comme ce qui ne se révèle pas, comme ce qui ne se laisse pas thématiser. Je ne saurais parler d'autrui, en faire un thème, le dire comme objet, à l'accusatif. Je puis seulement, je *dois* seulement parler à autrui, l'appeler au vocatif qui n'est pas une catégorie, un *cas* de la parole, mais le surgissement, l'élévation même de la parole. [...] [P]our qu'autrui ne soit pas manqué, il faut qu'il se présente comme absence et apparaisse comme non-phenomenalité.<sup>74</sup>

Novalis's thought in the 'Fichte-Studien' is remarkably close to that of Levinas and Derrida. In his comments on the idea of 'the pure', which must be an absolute in the sense of its untouchable and essential singularity, he articulates this paradoxical relation to the absolute in typically concise and explicit fashion. While reiterating the idea that 'das Reine' cannot be a direct object of consciousness or

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<sup>73</sup> Manfred Frank, *Das Problem 'Zeit'*, p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 152.

philosophical discourse, Novalis broaches the possibility of nevertheless entering into a relation with it:

Der Begriff *rein* ist also ein leerer Begriff – i.e. ein Begriff, dem keine Anschauung entspricht – ein weder möglicher, noch wirklicher Begriff, noch ein Nothwendiger – alles Reine ist also eine Täuschung der Einbild[ungs] Kr[aft] – eine *nothwendige* Fiction. Wahrheit – Fiction oder Schein.<sup>75</sup>

But the fictionality of ‘das Reine’ is no cause for fear or despair. It is, as Novalis says, *necessary*. I cannot stress this enough; not least because this relation to an impossible yet necessary absolute is the very matrix of the similarities between Novalis and Derrida. As I said above, Novalis sees the philosophical systems of his contemporaries as emerging from a ‘Streben nach dem Denken eines Grundes’. The following quote from Friedrich Schlegel on ‘absolute truth’ is a good illustration of the Romantic position with regard to the absolute. We notice the emphasis on freedom; a freedom of spirit which would only be limited by philosophical attempts to fix the absolute in a single determinate proposition:

*Absolute Wahrheit kann nicht zugegeben werden; und dies ist die Urkunde für die Freyheit der Gedanken und des Geistes. Wenn die absolute Wahrheit gefunden wäre, so wäre damit das Geschäft des Geistes vollendet, und er müßte aufhören zu seyn, da er nur in der Thätigkeit existirt.*<sup>76</sup>

And Novalis says of the absolute ground:

Alles Philosophiren muß also bey einem absoluten Grund endigen. Wenn dieser nun nicht gegeben wäre, wenn dieser Begriff eine Unmöglichkeit

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<sup>75</sup> N II, p. 179, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 234.

<sup>76</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, vol. 12, p. 93.

enthielte – so wäre der Trieb zu Philosophieren eine unendliche Tätigkeit – und darum ohne Ende, weil ein ewiges Bedürfnis nach einem absoluten Grunde vorhanden wäre, das doch nur relativ gestillt werden könnte – und darum nie aufhören würde. Durch das freywillige Entsagen des Absoluten entsteht die unendliche freye Thätigkeit in uns – das Einzig mögliche Absolute, was uns gegeben werden kann und was wir nur durch unsre Unvermögenheit ein Absolutes zu erreichen und zu erkennen, finden. Dies uns gegebene Absolute läßt sich nur negativ erkennen, indem wir handeln und finden, daß durch kein Handel erreicht wird, was wir suchen. Das ließe sich ein absolutes Postulat nennen. Alles Suchen nach *Einem Princip* wär also ein Versuch die Quadratur des Zirkels zu finden.<sup>77</sup>

For Novalis, such a single grounding principle simply cannot be thought. The self, thought and philosophy, emerging as they do from difference and substitutions and subject to time, cannot encompass ‘das Reine’, an absolutely singular entity, complete in and of itself; One. The absolute can neither be known nor thought since we can only know objects. Novalis states clearly that ‘das Absolute, das *bloße Wesen* ist nicht erkennbar’ and that the pure does not exist other than in the sense, as we have seen, of a ‘*nothwendige Fiction*’.<sup>78</sup> Andrew Bowie says rightly of the above quotation: ‘Crucially, and contrary to so many interpretations of Romanticism, this does not mean that one gives way to an indeterminate longing for the impossible.’<sup>79</sup> As the long Novalis quotation above demonstrates, the idea of the absolute must be simultaneously believed in and renounced: ‘Durch das freywillige Entsagen des Absoluten entsteht die unendliche freye Thätigkeit in uns [...]’ It is the failure to appreciate this paradoxical situation which has given rise to the diametrically opposed (mis)readings of Romanticism which we considered in the introduction.

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<sup>77</sup> N II, pp. 269-70, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 566.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 179, no. 234.

<sup>79</sup> Bowie, p. 78.

For Novalis finding the ground is impossible – akin to ‘squaring the circle’ – but the paradox consists in the fact that we cannot cease to search for it. Such a paradox is irreducible and non-dialectizable, an aporia or ‘double bind’. This, as Derrida tells us again and again, is the situation in which we have always found ourselves and will always find ourselves. He suggests in *Apories* that perhaps we have no alternative to a kind of non-passive ‘endurance’ of this situation, but even this endurance and the ‘experience’ of the aporia cannot be seen in terms of an ‘either/or’ alternative:

Que serait-il une telle *expérience*? Le mot signifie aussi passage, traversée, endurance, épreuve du franchissement, mais peut-être une traversée sans ligne et sans frontière indivisible. Peut-il jamais s’agir, justement, [...], de dépasser une aporie, de franchir une ligne oppositionnelle *ou bien* d’appréhender, d’endurer, de mettre autrement à l’épreuve l’expérience de l’aporie? Et s’agit-il à cet égard d’un *ou bien ou bien*? Peut-on parler et en quel sens d’une *expérience de l’aporie*? *De l’aporie comme telle*? Ou inversement: une expérience est-il possible qui ne soit pas expérience de l’aporie?<sup>80</sup>

In *Apories*, Derrida follows the trace of the aporia throughout his own work and draws attention to the fact that he has never ceased to engage with it. He describes his work as a kind of ‘aporétographie’ or ‘aporétologie’,<sup>81</sup> and recalls a moment in which he has perhaps come closest to *defining* deconstruction – in ‘Invention de l’autre’: ‘L’intérêt de la déconstruction, de sa force et son désir si elle en a, c’est une certaine expérience de l’impossible: c’est-à-dire, [...], *de l’autre*, l’expérience de l’autre comme invention de l’impossible, en d’autres termes comme

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<sup>80</sup> Derrida, *Apories*, p. 35.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



la seule invention impossible.’<sup>82</sup> In *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, Derrida considers the importance of the word for de Man and also for deconstruction:

Le mot d’aporie revient souvent dans les derniers textes de Paul de Man. Je crois qu’on l’entendrait mal si on en arrêta le sens au plus près de sa littéralité: absence de chemin, paralysie devant le non-passage, immobilisation de la pensée, impossibilité d’avancer, barrage devant l’avenir. Il me semble, au contraire, que l’expérience de l’aporie, telle que de Man la déchiffre, donne ou promet la pensée du chemin, provoque à penser la possibilité même de ce qui reste encore impensable ou impensé, voire impossible.<sup>83</sup>

And Novalis, in remarkably similar terms to Derrida, emphasizes the positive and productive nature of paradox, wondering:

Sollte das höchste Princip das höchste Paradoxon in seiner Aufgabe enthalten? Ein Satz seyn, der schlechterdings keinen Frieden ließe – der immer anzöge, und abstieße – immer von neuen unverständlich würde, so oft man ihn auch schon verstanden hätte? Der unsre Thätigkeit unaufhörlich rege machte – ohne sie je zu ermüden, ohne sie je gewohnt zu werden?<sup>84</sup>

Both Derrida and Novalis attach great importance to the way in which a paradox or an aporia, refusing to leave us in peace, can ‘provoke’ further thought, even ‘promise’ the thinking of the impossible. The oscillation between two alternatives, with neither the possibility of coincidence nor of the closing of the dialectical movement, is the ‘highest principle’, the only chance of respecting the other which cannot be thought or made an object. Novalis’s praise for paradox contrasts sharply with the perception of him as a ‘Romantic’ poet: one whose constant yearning for an

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<sup>82</sup> Derrida, *Psyché* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 27.

<sup>83</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>84</sup> N II, pp. 523-24, ‘Logologische Fragmente’, no. 9.



irretrievable absolute is mingled with the anticipation of an ecstatic telos. But neither is it a question of a straightforward negative theology. It is not a question of a belief in 'pure absence'. To speak of an 'absent' absolute actually implies the *presence* of an absolute which is merely located somewhere else. As Derrida says, there logic could make its claim.<sup>85</sup> Certainly, the original difference from which self-consciousness and thought emerge bear the trace of both past and future but Novalis and Derrida demonstrate that we can and must live with this paradoxical situation and respect the radical alterity of the totally-other without seeking to master or *possess* it once more.

### **Absolute reflection or lost origin?**

In the introduction we looked at the various ways of reading which define criticism on the affinities between early Romanticism and poststructuralism. I outlined two different versions of an 'either/or' approach, one of which can be broadly defined in terms of its insistence on 'yearning for metaphysical plenitude'. The inverse would be the insistence on awareness of 'metaphysical void'. In the context of self-consciousness, a brief look at the lack of critical consensus on the absolute demonstrates that it is precisely the endurance of a paradox which the either/or approach will always overlook. I do not, therefore, wish to show how each type of criticism would fit into our consideration of the paradoxical relation to the absolute

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<sup>85</sup> See Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 135.

but rather at one critic, Winfried Menninghaus, who takes issue with another – Manfred Frank.

Menninghaus's problem is that Frank, eschewing an either/or approach, is happy to leave paradoxes unresolved. In his book, *Unendliche Verdoppelung*, Menninghaus attacks Frank's insistence on the ground or origin which always already escapes discourse and the objectifying consciousness. Where Frank maintains the deficiency of reflection, and connects it with separation and objectification, Menninghaus, following in the tradition which stretches from Hegel to Walter Benjamin, argues that reflection itself *is* the absolute. In Frank's reading, the 'Wechselwirkung' between 'Gefühl' and 'Gedanke' never lets the pre-reflexive absolute be captured or mastered by consciousness. However, for Frank this lack is not a pure and simple absence but rather the always already escaped absolute which opens up the possibility of the subject and, by extension, time, thought and philosophy. Menninghaus insists, on the contrary, that the absolute is first *created* by the play between the poles, as "Medium" eines differentiellen Spiels ohne festen Grund'.<sup>86</sup> However, ironically, it is Menninghaus not Frank who insists that this 'absolute reflection' is of the same order as Derridean *différance*. Menninghaus's reading is radically unfaithful to the texts of both Novalis and Derrida. To pursue it to its logical conclusion would involve the dissolution of the paradox upon the irreducible nature of which both Derrida and Novalis insist. As Geoffrey Bennington puts it, in a formulation which could be applied verbatim to Novalis's outline of self-consciousness:

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<sup>86</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdoppelung: Die Frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1987), p. 57.

*Différance* is never pure. One cannot make it into an absolute (on pain of falling into Hegel's absolute difference and reverting to identity [...]): it is always in-between or in-the-process-of, never itself, never present.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, as I have shown above, lack – the ‘Mangel an Sein’ and the unrepresentability of the absolute – is central to Novalis's thinking. Menninghaus's attempts to convert this into a positive game of differences do not seem appropriate, especially since the lack is *already* for Novalis the prerequisite for the difference from which self-consciousness emerges. As Derrida expresses it:

Seul, l'autre, le tout-autre, peut se manifester comme ce qu'il est, avant la vérité commune, dans une certaine non-manifestation et dans une certaine absence. De lui seul on peut dire que son phénomène est une certaine non-phénoménalité, que sa présence (*est*) une certaine absence. Non pas absence pure et simple, car la logique finirait par y retrouver son compte, mais une *certaine* absence.<sup>88</sup>

Herbert Uerlings seems to find the difference between Menninghaus and Frank so subtle as to be almost irrelevant:

Man kann durchaus die Kritik des Ursprungsdenkens in den Mittelpunkt von Hardenbergs Philosophieren stellen und den von Derrida betonten Doppelsinn von ‘différance’ (Aufschiebung, Verzeitlichung *und* Nicht-Identität, Anderssein) hier vorgedacht finden. Ob man aber deshalb schon behaupten kann (und muß), Hardenberg habe auch den Gedanken dekonstruiert, daß diese Dualität in einer ihr zugrunde- und voraufliegenden und der philosophischen Reflexion nicht weiter zugänglichen Einheit begründet sei – das bliebe als einzige Differenz zwischen Menninghaus und Frank –, ist sehr fraglich.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 135.

<sup>89</sup> Herbert Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg genannt Novalis: Werk und Forschung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), p. 619.

While I agree with Uerlings that this difference is very subtle, I simply cannot agree that his verdict does justice to the questions with which we have dealt in this chapter. Firstly, it fails to appreciate the complexity of the engagement with Romanticism and poststructuralism of critics such as Frank. As such, it represents a certain levelling of the differences between modern critical attitudes and schools of literary theory. These differences are vital to literary debate and, regardless of whether or not one agrees with the one or the other, one simply cannot ignore their importance not just for the criticism of Romanticism and poststructuralism but also for the wider field of literary theory. But secondly, and even more importantly, it seems to me that the ‘subtle difference’ which Uerlings is so swift to dismiss is the most central similarity between Novalis and Derrida – and by that I mean not only central to my thesis but also vital to the thought of both writers. When Derrida says that deconstruction is not an enclosure in language but an openness towards the other which manifests itself as ‘a certain absence’, we see the structure of Novalis’s relation to a necessary *and yet fictional* absolute. Derrida says in *De la grammatologie*: ‘On ne peut s’empêcher de vouloir maîtriser l’absence et pourtant il nous faut toujours lâcher prise.’<sup>90</sup> The eternal ‘Reitz’ of the absolute is desire itself; the call of the other without which there would be no need to speak. As Simon Critchley says of deconstruction’s relation to the ‘tradition’, in a formulation which seems to me to trace the structure of Novalis’s fictional absolute:

To say that the goal of Derridian deconstruction is not simply the *unthought* of the tradition but rather that-which-cannot-be thought, is to engage in neither sophisticated rhetoric nor negative theology. It is rather to point towards that which philosophy is unable to say.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 204.

<sup>91</sup> Critchley, p. 29.

So our next question has to be: is there another way of saying 'that which philosophy is unable to say?' A way of preserving some orientation towards truth without curtailing what Schlegel calls 'freedom of thought and of spirit'? In the next chapter, I want to examine what we call 'literature' and 'literary theory' and ask whether they can be regarded as an inevitable response to the questions raised by Novalis and Derrida and their paradoxical relation to the absolute. But, as we shall see, it is not simply a question of a straightforward alternative to philosophy. With Novalis and Derrida, as will be clear by now, a simple either/or approach is never an option.

## Chapter 2

### Philosophy, Literature and the Logic of Leakage

**‘Ohne Philosophie unvollkommener Dichter’<sup>1</sup>**

Novalis, ‘Logologische Fragmente’

**‘Il n’y a pas une transgression si l’on entend par là l’installation pure et simple dans un au-delà de la métaphysique, en un point qui serait aussi, ne l’oublions pas, et d’abord un point de langage ou d’écriture.’<sup>2</sup>**

Derrida, *Positions*

#### Difficulties of Categorization

Having looked at their questioning of philosophy’s desire to render into discourse the absolutely other, we now need to look in a little more detail at ways in which Novalis and Derrida explore the possibility of relating to the absolute while at the same time respecting its otherness. The most immediately obvious way of doing so is to consider how this attitude of respect manifests itself in the *kind* of texts they produce. By this I mean not only what the texts say but also how they say it. But, having said that, the distinction between ‘doing’ and ‘saying’ will turn out to be one of the oppositions which their texts seek to complicate.

My initial motivation for embarking on a comparison of Derrida and Novalis had a lot to do with certain similarities in the way both writers are perceived in

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<sup>1</sup> N II, p. 531, ‘Logologische Fragmente’, no. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, ‘Implications’, interview with Henri Ronse, *Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), p. 21.

literary studies. There seems to be a lack of consensus as to what they actually *do*. They are *writers*, certainly, but is it possible to say what kind of writer? Novalis is sometimes described as a poet; sometimes as a philosopher. Are we to regard Derrida as a philosopher, a literary critic or simply a ‘theorist’? Indeed, there is a certain irony about the place which Derrida occupies in relation to both philosophy and literary studies: a writer who has claimed that ‘il n’y a pas de philosophie de Jacques Derrida’, he is almost always to be found in the philosophy section of university libraries and academic bookshops. It is almost as though both groups – literary critics and philosophers – want to dissociate themselves from a writer whose work could be seen to threaten the integrity of their respective disciplines.

Although it might be regarded as a superficial similarity, in that one notices it without having studied their work in very great detail, this confusion of categorisation and the fact that their texts resist easy definition reveal a more fundamental similarity between Derrida and Novalis. As I pointed out in the introduction, critics have for some time now been drawing parallels between German Romanticism and poststructuralism and even, at times, explicitly between the work of Novalis and Derrida. We saw that Margaret Mahony Stoljar is one critic who argues that Novalis’s texts ‘proceed by intuitive and imaginative reasoning, rather than sustained systematic argument, in a manner that has become familiar in the writings of Derrida and others of our time.’<sup>3</sup> I do not want to pursue this argument to its logical conclusion, because setting up another opposition between ‘systematic argument’ and ‘imaginative reasoning’ would ultimately be untenable and would do

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Mahony Stoljar, ‘Introduction’, *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 2.

more to obscure than to clarify the issues with which we are dealing here. However, engaging with part of Stoljar's opposition, I *would* like to explore whether the eschewal of 'sustained systematic argument' that she sees in the writings of Novalis and Derrida is merely a manifestation of similarities in form and style or whether it is, rather, evidence of similar views on philosophy and literature. If tradition has generally seen literature as an aesthetic object and thus entirely separate from philosophy as a quasi-scientific and universally valid system for describing reality or – since Descartes – the conditions of human understanding, the texts of both Derrida and Novalis suggest that philosophy and literature cannot be regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather than treating literature and philosophy as strictly delineated areas of culture, Novalis and Derrida invite us to consider ways in which philosophy and literature have – or ought to have – more in common than tradition has tended to allow. However, as we shall see, this is not to say that distinction between philosophy and literature is entirely meaningless.

At the end of Chapter 1, I asked whether a new type of 'literature' can be regarded as emerging from some of the issues confronting eighteenth-century philosophy. I would now like to consider this question, as well as to explore the wider implications of writing which questions the rigidity of distinctions such as the one between literature and philosophy. By 'wider' I do not mean that I will be attempting to trace a broad historical path from Romanticism to modern literature and literary theory. Apart from the fact that this subject has been covered extensively by critics in recent years,<sup>4</sup> it has never been my intention to treat Derrida and Novalis

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) and Manfred Frank, *Das Problem 'Zeit' in*



in terms of their historical relation to one another. By 'wider' I mean rather that, more than the other chapters, this one considers some of their more general statements *about* philosophy and writing, in addition to selected texts that exemplify the kind of writing which itself complicates the literature/philosophy opposition. In the case of Novalis, we will look at some of his collaborations with Friedrich Schlegel, including the famous *Athenäum* fragments and aphorisms. We will look at some of Derrida's interviews – for instance, in *Positions* – and at earlier texts such as *De la grammatologie* and *La dissémination*. These early texts can be regarded as more programmatic than his later work, and it is here that Derrida expounds in the greatest detail the idea of 'supplementarity', a structure which informs all of his work. Furthermore, a discussion of the logic of supplementarity must be the next step since it gives us the means not only to examine the relationship between philosophy and its various others, but also to understand the themes which are discussed in the following two chapters: the concept of nonclosure and the interrelation between self and human other.

## Theory

As I hinted above, when considering the difficulty of describing Novalis and Derrida as writers, perhaps the best word for writing which shares features of literature and philosophy and yet is neither the one nor the other is 'theory'. Indeed, both Derrida and Novalis are often called 'theorists'. There is good reason to focus on theory as a

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*der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung* (München: Winkler, 1972).

framework for negotiating the complex relationship between philosophy and poetry. It goes without saying that the critical theory of literature has occupied writers since Aristotle. However, what we call 'theory' today is rather different. It is a word which enjoys great notoriety in literary studies and which is often used negatively, perhaps by those who might come under my earlier (admittedly somewhat simplistic) category of critics whose faith in the 'transcendental signified' remains unshakeable in the face of the questioning attitude of theorists. It is certainly a word familiar to today's student of literature and, rather than being the theory *of* something in particular, it is simply known as 'theory' or sometimes 'literary theory', which is something of a misnomer since theory casts its gaze far wider than the borders of what we think of as literature. This is, of course, no accident. Indeed, Jonathan Culler, pointing to one possible definition, suggests that 'theory' is a nickname or 'convenient designation' to describe 'works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong.'<sup>5</sup>

One reason to consider Novalis and Derrida as producers of the particular type of writing known as 'theory' is the fact that, as we have seen, some critics – Culler among them – have started to locate the *origins* of modern theory in the era of German Romanticism as much as in the twentieth century's reception of Saussure's linguistics. Andrew Bowie, for instance, in his study of the path from German Romantic philosophy to modern critical theory, argues that the German philosophical tradition he explores is 'the historical and theoretical "condition of possibility" of the new wave of theory which developed from the 1960s onwards in the works of

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and others'.<sup>6</sup> And, as Culler's definition suggests, theory is very much about questioning boundaries and mixing disciplines. The philosopher Richard Rorty, who also locates its origins in the era of German Romanticism, gives his own attempt at a definition:

Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson, a new kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor social prophecy but all of these mingled together.<sup>7</sup>

Bowie, too, is keenly aware that this mixing and mingling of disciplines is perhaps the most easily discernible similarity between German Romanticism and what we today call theory. This observation, in which he directly equates 'literary theory' and 'Romantic philosophy', is worth quoting in full:

Literary theory is itself a hybrid rather than a unified discipline, combining resources from philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, feminism, social theory and other areas of the humanities, in order to question basic assumptions about the understanding of texts and other bearers of truth and meaning in both the human and the natural sciences. Like Romantic philosophy, literary theory can be understood as part of a growing reaction against the separation of the everyday 'life world' from the systematically determined spheres of science, technology and modern bureaucracy. By crossing the boundaries between subjects it attempts to reveal the repressions involved in the specialisation of knowledge into discrete cultures of experts. The fact that objections of the kind made to Romantic thinking have resurfaced in recent objections to literary theory can further suggest ways in which they are closely related. The fundamental attribute which Romantic philosophy shares with literary theory is, then, a questioning of the borders between differing disciplines, including those between the humanities and the sciences.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bowie, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 66. Cited by Culler, *Literary Theory*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bowie, p. 16.

If we look at the range of topics covered by Novalis and Derrida, we can see how accurately the above pertains to our two writers. Novalis, a polymath who was a salt-mine inspector as well as a poet and philosopher, writes on themes which extend from language and politics to religion and geology. The title of one of his collections of notes and aphorisms, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, composed with an encyclopaedic project in mind, indicates his fascination with establishing connections and correspondences between different fields and spheres of knowledge. Headings such as ‘Musikalische Physik’<sup>9</sup> and ‘Medizinische Politzey’<sup>10</sup> demonstrate the juxtaposition of apparently diverse subjects. Derrida has written of love and friendship, death and apartheid, as well as literature and philosophy. In many ways, though, the broad range of subjects covered by both writers is less important than the way in which they both seek to demonstrate how the most apparently clear distinctions are far from fixed. This kind of thinking has inevitable implications for the academic disciplines of literary criticism, philosophy, history and the human sciences. Derrida is fascinated by theory’s potential for shaking up the academic institution, and we might wonder whether the early Romantics’ dream of a universal ‘Symphilosophie’ has been realized in what we know today as ‘cultural studies’.

However, I am less interested in looking at theory as a branch of the humanities than in examining more fundamental reasons why the texts of Derrida and Novalis seek to demonstrate the permeability of perceived and staunchly defended boundaries such as the one between philosophy and literature. Therefore, we will focus on the ways in which these two writers deal with questions of the

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<sup>9</sup> N III, p. 311, ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 387.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 313, no. 395.

philosophical and the literary. This does not mean that we are going to ignore 'theory'. In fact, the opposite is the case. I referred above to a certain questioning attitude which characterizes theory and theorists. There is no doubt that the mixing of disciplines and genres is the most noticeable characteristic of theory. However, the questioning attitude, though it is less easy to define, is actually more significant. Indeed, it is only thanks to this questioning that the divisions separating fields of knowledge and forms of discourse have come to be re-examined. It has to do with a constant *self*-questioning. Theory – poststructuralist theory, in particular – is constantly in the process of examining its own conditions of possibility. This is why it is so difficult to define theory. And it is precisely this kind of self-questioning which characterizes the new kind of *literature* which emerged in the Romantic era.

### **'This Strange Institution Called Literature'**

Derrida often points out – without specifically locating its origins in the Romantic era – that the phenomenon we call 'literature' is 'a very recent invention'.<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Derek Attridge on 'this strange institution called literature', Derrida speaks of the conventions and laws of authorial property which go some way towards creating a distinction between literature 'in modernity' and Graeco-Latin poetry or *belles-lettres*.<sup>12</sup> 'What is literature?' is a question which comes up again and again in

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', interview with Derek Attridge, in *Acts of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75 (p. 40). This is the translated and edited transcript of an interview, unpublished in French, that took place in Laguna Beach in April 1989. (Translation by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Derrida's work, and it is immediately clear that this is an extremely difficult question – an impossible question. As Derrida puts it:

even if a phenomenon called 'literature' appeared historically in Europe, at such and such a date, this does not mean that one can identify the literary object in a rigorous way. It doesn't mean that there is an essence of literature. It even means the opposite.<sup>13</sup>

Novalis, too, is aware that it is impossible to define the essence of literature. The following quotation is a very astute recognition that it is the singularity – what Derrida calls the signature or the idiom – of a literary text which precludes its being fully conceptualized by the discourse of criticism: 'Kritik der Poesie ist ein Unding. Schwer schon ist es zu entscheiden, doch einzig mögliche Entscheidung, ob etwas Poësie sey, oder nicht. [...] Der Dichter ordnet, vereinigt, erfindet – und es ist ihm selbst unbegreiflich warum gerade so und nicht anders.'<sup>14</sup> However, we can take our cue from Novalis's paradoxical assertion of the simultaneous difficulty and necessity of deciding whether something is or is not literature. It is not possible to define a fixed essence of literature. Even in terms of identifying 'style' – what Derrida calls the idiom or signature of the author who wants to write like no other – it is impossible to say that such-and-such a text has certain *inherent* qualities which mark it as literature. However, it is possible to say that literary texts all *do* something. These texts, which we might call 'modern' in accordance with Derrida's above distinction, operate in the mode of questioning activity which also characterizes 'theory'. The new type of literature which emerges in the Romantic era is no longer governed by mimesis and no longer regarded as an aesthetic discourse entirely

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>14</sup> N III, p. 685-86, 'Fragmente und Studien 1799/1800', no. 671.

separate from philosophy; a self-conscious literature which, in Schlegel's famous definition of Romantic literature, is 'zugleich Poesie und die Poesie der Poesie'.<sup>15</sup> In their preface to *L'absolu littéraire*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy make an interesting point about this new kind of literature. They cite Madame de Staël's observation that what is new about German literature at the end of the eighteenth century is not so much 'literature' but rather 'criticism' or, as she also puts it, 'théorie littéraire'.<sup>16</sup> But, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, she fails to recognize that 'le romantisme n'est ni "de la littérature" (ils en inventent le concept) ni même, simplement, une "théorie de la littérature" (ancienne et moderne), mais la théorie elle-même comme littérature ou, cela revient au même, la littérature se produisant en produisant sa propre théorie.'<sup>17</sup> It is this critical or theoretical aspect which Derrida pinpoints when he characterizes the (mostly twentieth-century) literary texts which interest him. In fact, he might almost have been speaking of early Romantic literature when he says of these texts:

[They] all have in common that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature. They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: 'What is literature?' or 'Where does literature come from?' 'What should we do with literature?'<sup>18</sup>

This consideration of literature as the theory of itself, or as the 'putting to work' of the question of its own conditions of possibility, emerges from a certain confusion of

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-), vol. II, p. 204, 'Athenäums-Fragmente', no. 238.

<sup>16</sup> Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), p. 162. Cited by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', *Acts of Literature*, p. 41.



distinctions not only between philosophy and literature but also between other pairs of opposites such as philosophy/writing, speech/writing, and language/truth. This chapter will deal with these oppositions, looking at how they emerge, only to discover that they are always already in deconstruction. The whole chapter will be marked by the entwining of two broadly discernible movements: one traces ways in which philosophy has always had trouble keeping language or literature safely 'outside', and the other suggests ways in which literature welcomes philosophical concepts and even provides a viable alternative means of articulating philosophical concerns.

In a sense, we are now moving on to look at texts which are ostensibly less 'philosophical' than those we read in Chapter 1. By this I mean that they do not explicitly refer to 'the absolute' or 'the absolutely-other'. However, the metaphysical notion of the absolute is what underpins concepts such as truth, meaning and reality and their accessibility to discourse – philosophical or otherwise. Here the Derridean concept of 'présence' is very useful because truth, meaning and reality are all founded upon an assumption of absolute presence. In the previous chapter, we saw that for Fichte the absolute ground of a philosophical system is the ego's presence to itself and that this self-presence is then accessible to thought and to philosophy (or, rather, to philosophy *as* thought: what Derrida will call after Plato 'living philosophy'). In this chapter, we will look more specifically at language, and whether language can refer directly to these anterior forms of presence: 'truth', 'meaning' and 'reality'. It is the particular forms of language known as writing and literature which



reveal the complicated folds which interest both Novalis and Derrida, and highlight remarkable affinities between them.

Before we go on, I would like to say a few words about the title of this chapter. It is important to stress at this early stage that, although ‘theory’ and the emergence of a new kind of literature provide useful ways to focus on the oppositions and boundaries in question, it is not a matter of *transgressing* boundaries as such. This word suggests the simple and direct breaching of a boundary or the crossing of the line between two entirely separate realms. I have, therefore, borrowed from Nicholas Royle the expression ‘the logic of leakage’. He characterizes deconstruction as revealing, through the logic of the supplement, ‘an unsettling of borders, a troubling of inside/outside distinctions, a logic of leakage, of underflow and overflow’.<sup>19</sup> I hope that the other formulations I have used – like Derrida’s own – suggest a certain confusion or permeability of boundaries. This is no superficial question of emphasis. As we will see later in this chapter, philosophers have often seen philosophy’s relation to its various others – nonphilosophy, writing, literature – in terms of the distinction between the inside and the outside. But as Derrida says, there is no sure opposition between outside and inside: ‘Au terme d’un certain travail, le concept même d’excès ou de transgression pourra devenir suspect.’<sup>20</sup> On the other hand – and this is just as important – as I said above, it would be wrong to say that a distinction between philosophy and the various forms of nonphilosophy is meaningless. As Bennington says of ‘philosophical language’ and ‘ordinary language’: while there is no question of a rigorously definable distinction between

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, ‘Implications’, *Positions*, p. 21.

the two, this ‘does not imply total confusion, as might be feared, but passage and entwinings to be negotiated.’<sup>21</sup> Derrida himself suggests that the word ‘complication’ might be less vulnerable to misinterpretation than ‘confusion’ because his critics, Searle in particular, have read his questioning of boundaries as implying a desire to abolish *all* distinctions. In *Limited Inc*, he says that ‘the deconstruction of binary and hierarchical oppositions does not open the way to confusion, to “indistinction”, or to the empiricism that Searle seems to want to make his own, even if it is only in order to object to those benighted “literary theorists” who think, rightly, that a distinction without rigor and without precision is not one at all.’<sup>22</sup>

## Philosophical Beginnings

Before we come to the conception of literature as its own theory, we must build on the conclusions of Chapter 1, remaining for a little longer within philosophy in the tradition with which Novalis and Derrida engage. To put it very simply, they both have certain difficulties with this philosophical tradition and with philosophy’s own perception of its status, goals and objectives. Much of their work stems from a direct engagement with what have usually been regarded as strictly philosophical concerns. In Chapter 1, for instance, we dealt in detail with Novalis’s very specific engagement with Fichte’s philosophy and with Derrida’s reading of Levinas. We could say that

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<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, in Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 127. As I explained in Note 28 in the introduction, with the exception of ‘Signature Événement Contexte’, I cite Weber’s translations of the texts in *Limited Inc* because it is to these that Searle’s article and Derrida’s responses refer.

both Derrida and Novalis begin within philosophy. But if we attempt to begin at the beginning or to begin with their beginnings, we discover that it is never as simple as that. When considering beginnings, Novalis states that the first moment is actually, like Derrida's 'toujours-déjà,' already secondary, in the sense that the chain of causality can be said to extend infinitely in both directions: 'Aller wirklicher Anfang ist ein 2ter Moment.'<sup>23</sup> And, in his excellent account of Derrida and deconstruction, Bennington, having already admitted to the necessity of having to start 'somewhere' (which is not just 'anywhere'), characterizes Derrida's own beginnings as follows, and hints at how the very idea of beginnings is inextricably linked to the permeability of the literary/philosophical divide:

Derrida, for his part, did not begin at the beginning, [...]. Set off on a study of "The Ideality of the Literary Object," [...] which is an entirely marginal object for philosophy in the main lines of its tradition, he carries over problems to do with the sign and meaning and finds that philosophy never gets out of these problems. Starting with the sign is starting with secondariness itself, already the detour.<sup>24</sup>

Novalis questions philosophy's ability to locate a 'Grundsatz', a founding principle and absolute origin of a philosophical system. But there is more to consider here than a failed attempt to locate an origin or absolute starting point. We are also called upon to consider philosophy's *need* to do this. There are certain telling comments scattered throughout the aphoristic outline of a solution to the problems of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Far from being incidental, these comments actually inform Novalis's version of self-consciousness, and demonstrate his dissatisfaction with philosophy's attempts to fix permanently, to ground its propositions. It is made more

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<sup>23</sup> N II, p. 591, 'Vorarbeiten 1798: Anekdoten', no. 284.

<sup>24</sup> Bennington, 'Derridabase', p. 23-24.

or less explicit that this is a particularly *philosophical* desire. We saw that, in the ‘Fichte-Studien’, Novalis distinguishes between ‘Seyn’ (which is being for the ego and philosophy) and ‘Nur Seyn’ (which is the always already lost absolute origin and inaccessible to the ego and philosophy). He comes back again and again to the idea that philosophy is misguided in its desire to grasp this Being: ‘Hier bleibt die Philosophie stehn und muß stehn bleiben – denn darinn besteht gerade das Leben, das es nicht begriffen werden kann.’<sup>25</sup> He questions the very possibility of philosophy (‘Inwieweit ist Philosophie möglich.’<sup>26</sup>) and later relates this more specifically to philosophy’s pretensions to general and absolute truth: ‘Inwiefern kann eine Philosophie allgemeingeltend und wirksam werden.’<sup>27</sup> And, in a vivid and visual image, he describes the relativity which prevents the location of an absolute ground as follows: ‘Nur das Ganze ist *real* – Nur das Ding wäre absolut real, das nicht wieder *Bestandtheil* wäre. Das Ganze ruht ohngefähr – wie die spielenden Personen, die sich ohne Stuhl, blos Eine auf der andern Knie kreisformig hinsetzen.’<sup>28</sup> It is, for example, no accident that his more overtly literary texts also reject definitive beginnings and endings. His (unfinished) *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* ‘begins’ medias in res – and, as we shall see in our consideration of nonclosure in Chapter 3, what sets the novel’s narrative in motion is already itself narrative. Any attempt to claim this preceding narrative as the true beginning is thwarted by the fact that we know nothing of its origin – there are merely the shadowy tales of a mysterious stranger. We will have reason, too, to investigate the notion of accident. Much of Derrida’s work challenges the notion that properties of language such as problematic

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<sup>25</sup> N II, p. 106, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 223, no. 320.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 233, no. 390.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 242, no. 445.

beginnings or difficulties in establishing meaning are merely accidental. He seeks to show that these 'problems' are actually endemic. They are integral – or as he says *proper* – to both literature and philosophy. So it is precisely their dissatisfaction with the very concept of beginning which starts to reveal similarities in Derrida's and Novalis's views on philosophy.

It could certainly be argued – and this is very much Derrida's contention in the first part of *La dissémination* – that it is at philosophy's own beginnings that the problem of boundaries is first articulated. He maintains here, as he does elsewhere, that Platonism 'installe toute la métaphysique occidentale dans sa conceptualité',<sup>29</sup> and he sets out in *La dissémination* to examine Plato's attitude to writing. We are not yet dealing with 'literature'; either as the kind of writing Derrida discusses with regard to Ponge, Kafka and Mallarmé (among others) or as the early Romantic idea of literature as the theory of itself. That will come later. In Platonism it is *writing* itself which is seen to be somehow 'outside' true philosophy and living knowledge. The distinction between philosophy and writing in Plato becomes apparent in terms of this spatial difference between the inside and the outside. And, as Derrida's deconstruction of other binary opposites invariably reveals, we are not faced with the stable opposition of two different but equal parts, but rather with a motivated opposition, a hierarchical ordering. In 'La pharmacie de Platon', Derrida shows that writing is regarded as the subordinate of true philosophy and living knowledge, and lays bare a persistent and determined attempt to relegate writing to the outside. He discusses Plato's *Phaedrus*, and demonstrates that in this dialogue the idea of writing

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 95.

is equated with the *pharmakon*. *Pharmakon* can mean ‘drug’, both in the sense of ‘remedy’ and of ‘poison’, and this ambiguity gives Derrida the means, what he calls the ‘supplementary thread’ (‘fil supplémentaire’<sup>30</sup>), to negotiate the complexities of the origin, history and value of writing.

## The Logic of Supplementarity

Socrates compares the written texts which Phaedrus has brought with him to a *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon* would be something which comes from *outside* the body; something alien to the natural state of man, whether it be for good or ill; an inessential supplement to what is alive and natural. This brings us to the Derridean ‘logic of supplementarity’, first introduced in another of the earlier texts, *De la grammatologie*. Derrida makes the point several times in ‘La pharmacie de Platon’ that we are dealing here with the same logic which operates in the texts of Rousseau and Saussure. His reading of these two writers makes up the main body of *De la grammatologie*, perhaps his most famous work. The example of Rousseau’s attitude to writing is the clearest – and certainly the best-known – illustration of the logic of supplementarity. Derrida discusses both Rousseau’s essay on the origin of languages and his autobiographical *Confessions* and his tendency to talk – in fact, Rousseau does not talk but *writes* and this is part of the problem – of writing as a supplement to speech in almost the same terms as those in which, in the *Confessions*, he discusses masturbation as being a supplement to ‘natural’ sexuality. But the ambiguity of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

word 'supplement' itself aids Derrida in exposing the inevitable difficulties in the attempt to oppose speech to writing. I have chosen to say 'aids Derrida' rather than something like 'Derrida exploits the word supplement'. This latter formulation would be misleading since it would obscure the way in which Derrida takes a word – 'supplément' in the case of Rousseau, and for Mallarmé, 'hymen' – from the text in order to uncover the paradoxes that *already* structure the text. Derrida's own phrase, 'the supplementary thread', conveys this very well, with its connotations of unravelling from within rather than taking the 'scissors' of deconstruction to the perfect integrity of the text. As Geoffrey Bennington expresses it, paradoxes such as the one marking the speech/writing opposition 'are not imported into metaphysics by Derrida; on the contrary, they constitute metaphysics and in some sense speak its truth'.<sup>31</sup>

In both French and English, 'supplément' or 'supplement' means 'that which is added'. But it can mean either superadded to something complete in itself *or* added to something in order to make up for a certain incompleteness. Rousseau would like to regard writing as a supplement in the former sense: writing can be added to speech but is not a necessity since speech is complete in and of itself. Because it rests on the notion of the presence of the subject's thought to itself, living speech is to be preferred to writing which is held to be merely a secondary, derivative transcription of this thought. Writing is at times referred to by Rousseau as an inessential extra and even a 'disease of speech'. Writing can easily lead to misunderstandings, firstly because, in the most basic terms, as Derrida says in 'Signature Événement Contexte':

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<sup>31</sup> Bennington, 'Derridabase', p. 41-42.



‘Un signe écrit s’avance en l’absence du destinataire.’<sup>32</sup> But this absence is more than a modified presence. It is not merely a delay or a matter of distance, but a *radical* absence: ‘Une écriture qui ne serait pas structurellement lisible – itérable – par-delà la mort du destinataire ne serait pas une écriture.’<sup>33</sup> More importantly, this absence can also extend to the sender, the writer. For writing to function as writing, the thinking, speaking subject is not required to be present. This is not only accidental but, rather, an essential structural possibility. For writing to be writing, it must be possible for the written to be totally divorced (both temporally and spatially) from what the writing subject might have ‘intended’ to say. Again, Derrida’s analysis of writing in ‘Signature Événement Contexte’ is helpful here:

Pour qu’un écrit soit un écrit, il faut qu’il continue à ‘agir’ et être lisible même si ce qu’on appelle l’auteur de l’écrit ne répond plus de ce qu’il a écrit, de ce qu’il semble avoir signé, qu’il soit provisoirement absent, qu’il soit mort ou qu’en général il n’ait pas soutenu de son intention ou attention absolument actuelle et présente, de la plénitude de son vouloir-dire, cela même qui semble s’être écrit ‘en son nom’.<sup>34</sup>

Rousseau’s supplement is dangerous in that it displaces the ‘properness’ or plenitude which seems to constitute the moment of enunciation. But it is not as simple as that because, as Derrida demonstrates, even as Rousseau condemns writing, he actually treats it as something which makes good or completes the imperfections of speech. And this is more than a simple ‘performative contradiction’,<sup>35</sup> which term could be used to describe the paradoxical act of *writing*

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 374.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 375.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>35</sup> This term ‘performative contradiction’ has often been used by writers who seek to provide an account of the development of literary theory, in particular the importance accorded to aporia or



a condemnation of writing. Bennington recognizes that this is, indeed, one way of looking at the problem. However, pointing out that many people have (erroneously) taken this idea of a performative contradiction as Derrida's own conclusion, Bennington argues that it is actually the 'most obvious and least interesting conclusion'.<sup>36</sup> He does concede that this way of looking at it is 'not nothing' and we shall see later in the chapter how Novalis uses the idea of the performative contradiction to good effect. Bennington is trying to suggest here that what we are dealing with is more profound and complex than a performative contradiction.

Rousseau recognizes that spoken language can also be misleading. Derrida cites Jean Starobinski's analysis of Rousseau's decision 'to hide himself and write':

'Jean-Jacques choisit d'être *absent* et d'*écrire*. Paradoxalement, il se cachera pour mieux se montrer, et il se confiera à la parole écrite: "J'aimerais la société comme un autre, si je n'étais sûr de me montrer non seulement à mon désavantage, mais tout autre que je ne suis. Le parti que j'ai pris d'*écrire et de me cacher* est précisément celui qui me convenait. Moi présent, on n'aurait jamais su ce que je valais.'"<sup>37</sup>

Rousseau recognizes, as Derrida says, with incomparable acumen,<sup>38</sup> that speech, even though it *appears* not to leave the speaker, is marked as much as writing by the

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undecidability in certain types of theory, notably postmodernism and poststructuralism. One performative contradiction cited by Bennett and Royle is the celebrated example of the Cretan liar paradox: 'If someone says 'I am a liar', how can we tell if that person is lying or not?' Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London, New York, Toronto: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), p. 179. See also Peggy Kamuf's introduction to the Derrida reader *Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Bennington, 'Derridabase', p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Starobinski, *La transparence et l'obstacle*, p. 154. Cited by Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 205.

<sup>38</sup> 'En fait, Rousseau avait éprouvé le dérobement dans la parole même, dans le mirage de son immédiateté. Il l'avait reconnu et analysé avec une incomparable acuité.' Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 203.

necessity that, in order for the spoken words to be understood, it must be possible to repeat them in the absence of the speaker and, indeed, in the case of the ultimate absence which is death.

Through the logic of supplementarity, speech (as that which needs a supplement) is shown to have precisely the same qualities as the supposedly inferior supplement (writing). If writing as sign-system arises in the absence both of the signified *and* the human interlocutor, we see clearly that writing, a more generalized concept of writing, is actually the mode in which spoken language also operates. In 'Signature Événement Contexte', Derrida notes that it is the 'iterability in alterity' of the phonic signifier which allows it to be understood across empirical variations of tone, voice or accent:

Cette possibilité structurelle d'être sevrée du référent ou du signifié (donc de la communication et de son contexte) me paraît faire de toute marque, fût-elle orale, un graphème en général, c'est-à-dire, comme nous l'avons vu, la *restance* non-présente d'une marque différentielle coupée de sa prétendue 'production' ou origine.<sup>39</sup>

What we are beginning to articulate here is the Derridean idea of 'archi-écriture' as that which opens up the very possibility of the speaking subject even as it prevents self-presence and 'dislocates' the subject. In speech, presence is both promised and refused. There is thus: 'une puissance de mort au coeur de la parole vive'.<sup>40</sup> In the same way that Novalis requires us to believe in and *at the same time* to renounce the absolute, Derrida emphasizes the 'strange unity' of this 'supplementary logic':

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 378.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 204.

Ayant d'une certaine manière, disions-nous, reconnu cette puissance qui, inaugurant la parole, disloque le sujet qu'elle construit, l'empêche d'être présent à ses signes, travaille son langage de toute une écriture, Rousseau est néanmoins plus pressé de la conjurer que d'en assumer la nécessité. C'est pourquoi, tendu vers la reconstitution de la présence, il valorise et disqualifie à la fois l'écriture. À la fois: c'est-à-dire dans un mouvement divisé mais cohérent. Il faudra tenter de ne pas en manquer l'étrange unité. Rousseau condamne l'écriture comme destruction de la présence et comme maladie de la parole. Il la réhabilite dans la mesure où elle promet la réappropriation de ce dont la parole s'était laissée déposséder. Mais par quoi, sinon déjà par une écriture plus vieille qu'elle et déjà installée dans la place?<sup>41</sup>

## The (Non)truth of Writing

To return to 'La pharmacie de Platon': we learn that Phaedrus has brought along his texts in order to help him to remember what he wants to say and gradually a configuration emerges, linking writing, memory, and the *pharmakon*. It becomes clear that Socrates' association of writing with the *pharmakon* is neither artificial nor purely coincidental. Derrida says:

[...] une seule et même suspicion enveloppe, dans le même geste, le livre et la drogue, l'écriture et l'efficace occulte, ambiguë, livrée à l'empirisme et au hasard, opérant selon les voies du magique et non selon les lois de la nécessité. Le livre, le savoir mort et rigide enfermé dans les *biblia*, les histoires accumulées, les nomenclatures, les recettes et les formules apprises par coeur, tout cela est aussi étranger au savoir vivant et à la dialectique que le *pharmakon* est étranger à la science médicale. Et que le mythe au savoir.<sup>42</sup>

Pausing to note again the association of writing with death and written knowledge ('le savoir mort et rigide'), which Derrida develops elsewhere in the notion of the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 90.

monumentality of writing, or of writing as remains, we see that he closes in on this configuration wherein writing or myth is opposed to true knowledge. What we are seeing here is the very movement of deconstruction. Derrida's work on binary oppositions is perhaps his most radical and enduring contribution to theory. Many of his works have sought to show how seemingly fundamental oppositions are never stable and equal and can always be deconstructed, as in the case of Rousseau and the speech/writing opposition. The case of writing in Plato is, as we are beginning to see, another very clear example of this logic and of deconstruction at work. Derrida not only contests the validity of Plato's attempt to relegate writing to the subordinate position but he also, by examining Plato's own *attitude* towards writing, is able to find a loose thread (another 'fil supplémentaire') with which to start to unravel the philosophy/writing opposition.

The problem revolves around the idea of proximity to that which is supposed to be beyond – strictly speaking, *before* – language. This is of the order of presence and takes many guises, both in the various themes of this thesis, and more importantly – as the works of Derrida demonstrate again and again – throughout Western metaphysics. This presence can be the absolute foundation of a philosophical system, as we saw in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. In the case of Fichte, we can discern what might be regarded as a twofold assumption of presence. In his system it is the presence of the ego to itself in the Absolute Ego, which then guarantees another form of presence: the self-presence of the ego is directly accessible to philosophy. Here, with Plato, we are confronted with the idea of the living *logos* – with all this implies of presence and intention – as that which

guarantees meaning. Writing, by its very nature, is held to be at a further remove from the *logos* than speech (even though, as we saw above with regard to Rousseau, speech turns out to be always already characterized as much as writing by distance and *différance*.) In the *Phaedrus*, too, writing and myth are described as inessential extras. Like the *pharmakon* they have the potential – without being *intrinsically* good or evil – to be detrimental to that which is natural and true, in the same way as writing or masturbation for Rousseau. Derrida explains philosophy's attitude towards writing both in terms of truth and exteriority, and also in terms of distance from the origin:

Le vérité de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire, nous allons le voir, la non-vérité, nous ne pouvons la découvrir en nous-mêmes par nous-mêmes. Et elle n'est pas l'objet d'une science, seulement d'une histoire récitée, d'une fable répétée. Le lien de l'écriture au mythe se précise, comme son opposition au savoir et notamment au savoir qu'on puise en soi-même, par soi-même. Et du même coup, par l'écriture ou par le mythe, se signifient la rupture généalogique et l'éloignement de l'origine.<sup>43</sup>

But it is at one of the moments in Plato when memory is opposed to writing that the deconstructive reading begins to reveal a certain confusion of boundaries. I mentioned above that Phaedrus has brought his texts with him as an aid to memory. But Plato's opinion of the written text is that it leads one astray from true memory; having the words written down, on the 'outside' so to speak, one comes to rely on them and the work of living memory is neglected – it atrophies. Again Derrida points to the identification of the written (partly through its equation with the artificial and potentially lethal *pharmakon*) with a certain 'cadaverous rigidity'. He who relies on writing can leave his thoughts outside himself, consigning them to the 'marques

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

physiques, spatiales et superficielles qu'on met à plat sur une tablette [...].'<sup>44</sup> Being the ultimate absence, death always already marks – or, more precisely, *re*-marks – the essential possibility of absence which constitutes the written text, because he who trusts his thought to these marks knows that:

Ils le représenteront même s'il les oublie, ils porteront sa parole même s'il n'est plus là pour les animer. Même s'il est mort, et seul un *pharmakon* peut détenir un tel pouvoir, sur la mort sans doute mais aussi en collusion avec elle. Le *pharmakon* et l'écriture, c'est donc bien toujours une question de vie ou de mort.<sup>45</sup>

Precisely here, where living memory is opposed to the written text, the boundary begins to seem less defined and a problematic familiar to us from Rousseau and Novalis is revealed: 'Le dehors est déjà *dans* le travail de la mémoire. Le mal s'insinue dans le rapport à soi de la mémoire, dans l'organisation générale de l'activité mnésique.'<sup>46</sup> This is because the work of memory, 'mnesic activity', *always already* needs signs and substitutions to recall the nonpresent with which it is necessarily in relation. Plato has to acknowledge that memory is finite. A memory which could do without the supplement or the sign would no longer be memory but infinite self-presence ('l'infinité d'une présence à soi').<sup>47</sup> And so this opening of the supplementary outside means that the *pharmakon* always already penetrates or infects that which had wanted to do without it:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 129-30.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

Dès que le dehors d'un supplément s'est ouvert, sa structure implique qu'il puisse lui-même se faire 'typer', remplacer par son double, et qu'un supplément de supplément soit possible et nécessaire. Nécessaire parce que ce mouvement n'est pas un accident sensible et 'empirique', il est lié à l'idéalité de l'*eidōs*, comme possibilité de la répétition du même. Et l'écriture apparaît à Platon (et après lui à toute la philosophie que se constitue comme tel dans ce geste) comme cet *entraînement* fatal du redoublement: supplément de supplément, signifiant d'un signifiant, représentant d'un représentant.<sup>48</sup>

As we saw with Novalis's outline of self-consciousness, the intervention of these signs and substitutions necessary for the work of memory is also constitutive of the temporality which always already divides the subject in its aporetic relation to itself. The Platonic *eidōs* is already marked by this necessary iterability, in the same way in which the Fichtean proposition 'a ist a' expresses not absolute identity but only a relative identity – 'a ist a' is, in Novalis's words, a 'Scheinsatz'. The implications for Platonism (and, as Derrida sees it, for all of Western metaphysics) of the opening of the supplementary outside are felt in the way in which Plato must simultaneously maintain 'l'exteriorité de l'écriture et son pouvoir de pénétration maléfique, capable d'affecter ou d'infecter le plus profond.'<sup>49</sup> Derrida continues, linking the *pharmakon* explicitly with Rousseau's 'dangerous supplement': 'Le *pharmakon* est ce supplément dangereux qui entre par effraction dans cela même qui voudrait avoir pu s'en passer et qui se laisse à *la fois* frayer, violenter, combler et remplacer, compléter par la trace même dont le présent s'augmente en y disparaissant.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 137.



## Writing, Myth and Sophistics

But so much for the opposition memory/writing. What of philosophy? Derrida goes on with his deconstructive reading of the *Phaedrus* and discovers that, according to Plato, there is – or ought to be – a ‘true’ philosophy, lined up on the side of living memory, dialectics and true knowledge. Opposing these are writing, myth and ‘sophistics’. What characterizes these latter is that, even though the necessary intervention of representation in living memory or true knowledge must be conceded, writing and sophistics are at an even further remove from the *logos*. This brings us towards a clearer understanding of what Derrida might mean by the ‘remarque’. This useful term – almost a kind of short-hand – will also be important in Chapter 4, when we come to look at the death of a loved one. In writing the necessary iterability of the *eidos* is carried away by a repetition of *that which repeats*. Both sophistics *and* living dialectics presuppose the possibility of repetition, but in the case of sophistics (and writing): ‘Ce qui se répète, c’est le répétant, l’imitant, le signifiant, le représentant, à l’occasion en l’absence de *la chose même* qu’ils paraissent rééditer, et sans l’animation physique ou mnésique, sans la tension vivante de la dialectique.’<sup>51</sup> The idea of the re-mark provides us with a relatively concise way to express the reason for Plato’s distaste of writing. If, as we saw above with regard to Rousseau, speech is always already marked by the necessity of repetition in alterity, and thus the possibility of death, writing, by seeming to be *at an even further remove from* living memory, marks again, and more clearly, this necessity. Writing is the signifier’s capacity ‘to repeat itself by itself’, mechanically, without a living soul to sustain it

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 138.



and without the truth being *anywhere* present. Pursuing this, he concludes that the only thing separating sophistics and writing from philosophy and dialectics is 'l'épaisseur invisible, presque nulle, de telle *feuille* entre le signifiant et le signifié'.<sup>52</sup> As we shall see later on when we consider Mallarmé's use of the word 'hymen' in 'Mimique', this 'leaf' or sheet unites even as it separates. And it is the *unity* of the leaf that points to the ultimate inseparability of writing (or sophistics) and philosophy (or dialectics):

La différence entre signifié et signifiant est sans doute le schéma directeur à partir duquel le platonisme s'institue et détermine son opposition à la sophistique. S'inaugurant ainsi, la philosophie et la dialectique se déterminent en déterminant leur autre.<sup>53</sup>

### **'Verwechselung des Symbols mit dem Symbolisirten'**

Novalis, too, is aware that it is the distinction between signifier and signified which governs the philosophical attempts of his contemporaries to locate the absolute ground of philosophy. Obviously he does not use Saussurean terminology, but says in a formulation which is almost uncanny in the way that it anticipates the concerns of literary theory and philosophy in the twentieth century:

Auf Verwechselung des *Symbols* mit dem Symbolisirten – auf ihre Identisierung – auf den Glauben an wahrhafte, vollst[ändige] Repraesentation – und Relation des Bildes und des Originals – der Erscheinung und der Substanz – auf der Folgerung von äußerer Aehnlichkeit – auf durchgängige innre Übereinstimmung und Zusammenhang – kurz auf Verwechselungen

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

von Sub[ject] und O[bject] beruht der ganze Aberglaube und Irrthum aller Zeiten, und Völker und Individuen.<sup>54</sup>

It is precisely this ‘Glauben an wahrhafte, vollständige Repraesentation’ which Derrida examines in the second part of *La dissémination*, as we shall see when we come to his reading of Mallarmé in Chapter 3. One way of understanding the distaste for writing which characterizes the Western philosophical tradition is to say that metaphysics is only interested in the signified (in Novalis’s terms ‘the symbolized’) and abhors the fact that meaning must hide behind the signifier. This can be described in terms of the so-called ‘surface-depth model’, which is explained by Bennett and Royle: ‘Reading has conventionally been thought of on the basis of a surface-depth model, with the words of the text as the surface and the meaning lurking somewhere inside or underneath.’<sup>55</sup> Considering language as sign-system, this philosophical desire recognized by Novalis can be described as the desire to efface the signifier, or at least to render the symbol as transparent as possible, in order to access more easily the depths or the inside. So the fate of writing in the face of the philosophical wish to do without signs or, at the very least, to render them transparent, also has an effect on the concept of art. We see the inauguration of an aesthetics the value of which is also determined by proximity to or correspondence to ‘truth’ and the emergence of a mimetic conception of art, governed by this distinction between the symbol and symbolized. In the second part of *La dissémination*, Derrida begins to show how the status of writing in Platonism also produces the dominant conception of art. Stressing all the while that ‘writing’ is not exactly the same as ‘literary writing’, Derrida demonstrates that in Plato literary

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<sup>54</sup> N III, p. 397, ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 685.

<sup>55</sup> Bennett and Royle, p. 174.

writing, too, is governed by the relation of correspondence to that which is prior to it. Poets, for example, are condemned in the *Republic* as being mere ‘imitators’, this disdain underlining once more the preference for what is imitated: ‘La place spécifique du poète peut être jugée comme telle suivant qu’il fait ou non appel, de telle ou telle façon, à la forme mimétique.’<sup>56</sup>

Considering the metaphors of writing and painting, Derrida maintains that these share the same structure to the extent that both are ‘mesurés à la vérité dont ils sont capables [...]’. Dans le mouvement du *mimeisthai*, le rapport du mime au mimé, du reproducteur au reproduit, est toujours rapport à un *présent passé*. L’imité est avant l’imitant. D’où le problème de temps qui ne manque pas de se poser en effet.’<sup>57</sup>

We have inevitably come back to the question of time, which played such an important role in the discussion of self-consciousness in Chapter 1. For traditional metaphysics and its conceptualizing of mimetic art, the temporal structure – the before and after – of mimesis means that the signified (Novalis’s ‘symbolized’) must come first. Language, writing and art are then held to be secondary, supervening upon a prior presence or, rather, something which has once been present. This intimates the very nature of the representational model: to re-present is literally to ‘render present once more’.

Novalis rightly recognizes the tendency of metaphysics to confuse the symbol with the symbolized, but we must also be clear that the desire to do so rests on an assumption of their clear distinction. Looking at it from a slightly different

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<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 228.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

perspective, the notion of the gap which metaphysics would like to close only emerges thanks to this opposition. Derrida, too, highlights the traditional assumption of difference between word (or concept) and sign, and argues that in Platonism (and this includes the anti-Platonisms that regularly feed into it<sup>58</sup>) both art and philosophy are governed by their relation to the *on* (or 'being-present') and its clear distinction from the image or the appearance. Writing must appear before the tribunal of ontology: 'Le recours à la vérité de ce qui est, des choses même, permet toujours de décider, si oui ou non, l'écriture est vraie, si elle est conforme ou "*contraire*" au vrai.'<sup>59</sup> Derrida insists on two different, though related conceptions of truth. One is truth as the unveiling of that which lies concealed (*aletheia*) and the second is the idea of agreement (*homoiosis* or *adequatio*) which is the very value of imitation: 'rapport de ressemblance ou d'égalité entre une re-présentation et une chose (présent dévoilé)'.<sup>60</sup> He stresses that thus 'selon la "logique" même, [...] l'imité est plus réel, plus essentiel, plus vrai, etc., que l'imitant. Il lui est antérieur et supérieur.'<sup>61</sup> Derrida argues, while conceding that in twenty centuries of criticism and poetics a subversion has, at times, occurred whereby art is held to provide a richer and more pleasant, more 'real' reality, that this is nonetheless an 'extra-value' or 'extra-being' of reality and it comes back to the same root. Art is still judged in relation to what *is* and Derrida says: '[...] jamais la discernabilité absolue entre l'imité et l'imitant, ni l'antériorité de celui-là sur celui-ci, n'auront été déplacées par un système métaphysique.'<sup>62</sup> Plato's distaste for writing is a manifestation of this philosophical desire but, as we saw above in relation to the work of memory, signs and

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<sup>58</sup> See *La dissémination*, p. 235.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, pp. 227-28.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

supplements already penetrate – indeed, in a sense, constitute – the inside. Signifiers and symbols cannot be so readily effaced.

### **Novalis's 'Monolog'**

Derrida says above that no metaphysical system has ever succeeded in displacing the absolute superiority and anteriority of the imitated. But we have to ask whether or not *literature* can succeed, if not in displacing this order, then in complicating and questioning it. Novalis's famous short text, 'Monolog', as Andrew Bowie rightly says, is significant not only for the insights it offers into transformations of the understanding of language and truth in the Romantic era but also because the text itself 'offers an enactment of what Romanticism might mean by 'literature' ('Poesie').'<sup>63</sup> I would go further than Bowie and suggest that 'Monolog' as a text exemplifies many of the similarities between Novalis and Derrida. It not only complicates the relation between language and reality, and the boundary between literature and philosophy, but it does this with a certain ironic undecidability and a virtuosity which is characteristic of many of Derrida's own texts, as well as those (literary) texts in which he is most interested. If it seems that I have moved too quickly from the status of 'writing' in metaphysics to a new concept of 'literature', I would say only that 'Monolog' starts to demonstrate the way in which Romantic literature emerges from precisely these 'philosophical' questions of truth, language and iterability. Here is the full text of 'Monolog':

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<sup>63</sup> Bowie, p. 65.

Es ist eigentlich um das Sprechen und Schreiben eine närrische Sache; das rechte Gespräch ist ein bloßes Wortspiel. Der lächerliche Irrthum ist nur zu bewundern, daß die Leute meinen – sie sprächen um der Dinge Willen. Gerade das Eigenthümliche der Sprache, daß sie sich bloß um sich selbst bekümmert, weiß keiner. Darum ist sie ein so wunderbares und fruchtbares Geheimniß, – daß wenn einer bloß spricht, um zu sprechen, er gerade die herrlichsten, originellsten Wahrheiten ausspricht. Will er aber von etwas Bestimmten sprechen, so läßt ihn die launige Sprache das lächerlichste und verkehrteste Zeug sagen. Daraus entsteht der Haß, den so manche ernsthafte Leute gegen die Sprache haben. Sie merken ihren Muthwillen, merken aber nicht, daß das verächtliche Schwatzen die unendlich ernsthafte Seite der Sprache ist. Wenn man den Leuten nur begreiflich machen könnte, daß es mit der Sprache wie mit den mathematischen Formeln sei – Sie machen eine Welt für sich aus – Sie spielen nur mit sich selbst, drücken nichts als ihre wunderbare Natur aus, und eben darum sind sie so ausdrucksvoll – eben darum spiegelt sich in ihnen das seltsame Verhältnißspiel der Dinge. Nur durch ihre Freiheit sind sie Glieder der Natur und nur in ihren freien Bewegungen äußert sich die Weltseele und macht sie zu einem zarten Maaßstab und Grundriß der Dinge. So ist es auch mit der Sprache – wer ein feines Gefühl ihrer Applicatur, ihres Takts, ihres musikalischen Geistes hat, wer in sich das zarte Wirken ihrer innern Natur vernimmt, und danach seine Zunge oder seine Hand bewegt, der wird ein Prophet sein, dagegen wer es wohl weiß, aber nicht Ohr und Sinn genug für sie hat, Wahrheiten wie diese schreiben, aber von der Sprache selbst zum Besten gehalten und von den Menschen, wie Cassandra von den Trojanern, verspottet werden wird. Wenn ich damit das Wesen und Amt der Poesie auf das deutlichste angegeben zu haben glaube, so weiß ich doch, daß es kein Mensch verstehen kann, und ich ganz was albern gesagt habe, weil ich es habe sagen wollen, und so keine Poesie zu Stande kommt. Wie, wenn ich aber reden müßte? und dieser Sprachtrieb zu sprechen das Kennzeichen der Eingebung der Sprache, der Wirksamkeit der Sprache in mir wäre? und mein Wille nur auch alles wollte, was ich müßte, so könnte dies ja am Ende ohne mein Wissen und Glauben Poesie sein und ein Geheimniß der Sprache verständlich machen? und so wär' ich ein berufener Schriftsteller, denn ein Schriftsteller wohl ein Sprachbegeisterter?<sup>64</sup>

The most immediately striking feature of 'Monolog' is its questioning of language as a means of representing truths or 'things.' Novalis's comparison of language with mathematical formulae highlights the way in which language can be said to refer only to itself. The Saussurean pre-echoes here are unmissable. However,

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<sup>64</sup> N II, pp. 672-73.

Novalis does not reject entirely the possibility that language might also refer to something *other* than itself. Derrida's reading of Mallarmé will further elucidate the complexity of this (self-)referentiality, but I would argue that in 'Monolog' Novalis has already complicated the question in superbly economical fashion. It all revolves around the difference between the language of determinate propositions – which Novalis calls 'sprechen um der Dinge willen' or 'von etwas Bestimmten sprechen' – and another way of thinking about language. Novalis calls this other way of conceiving of language 'speaking in order to speak' ('wenn einer blos spricht, um zu sprechen'). In his book, *The Violence of Language*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle also rejects – in very similar terms to Novalis – the conception of language as an instrument for saying something determinate, saying that language 'always reminds us that it, and no one else, is speaking, that whenever we believe we rule over words, we are in the grip of an unavoidable but nevertheless delusive illusion.'<sup>65</sup> Novalis, too, recognizes that our illusory assumption that we control language is inevitable and, like Lecercle, makes language the grammatical subject, creating a subtle and uncanny sense that language is animate and autonomous.

Darum ist sie ein so wunderbares und fruchtbares Geheimniß, – daß wenn einer blos spricht, um zu sprechen, er gerade die herrlichsten, originellsten Wahrheiten ausspricht. Will er aber von etwas Bestimmten sprechen, so läßt ihn die launige Sprache das lächerlichste und verkehrteste Zeug sagen.

Derrida, in *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, is also fascinated by the 'fatal drift' suggested by the German prefix 'ver-', as in Novalis's 'verkehrteste Zeug'. Derrida cites de Man's subtle alteration to Heidegger's dictum that 'die Sprache spricht'. De

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<sup>65</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 265.



Man modifies this to: 'Die Sprache verspricht (sich).'<sup>66</sup> As well as noting the idea of 'promising', implicit in every 'act' of writing or speaking, Derrida admires de Man's playful manipulation of the 'ver-':

Paul de Man joue encore – [...] il insinue qu'à s'affecter d'un 'ver-' le *Sprechen* de la parole ne devient pas seulement prometteur, il se détraque, se perturbe, se corrompt, se pervertit, s'affecte d'une sorte de dérive fatale. Vous savez que le préfixe 'ver-' a très souvent cette signification en allemand.<sup>67</sup>

### **To be serious...**

It is helpful to digress a little at this point, letting ourselves be carried by another kind of drift and to look at Derrida's reflections on serious and non-serious uses of language in his extended debate with John Searle over J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory.<sup>68</sup> (Of course, the very notion of digression is one concept which is called into question by Derrida, and we find that the detour will bring us to where we want to go – if we let it.) In a long and complex debate – often about reading accurately and faithfully – it is possible to identify one particular issue at stake for both Searle and Derrida. This is Austin's contention, developed further by Searle, that it is possible and necessary to distinguish between 'serious' and 'non-serious' uses of language. The distinction is absolutely vital if a central tenet of speech act theory is

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<sup>66</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 277. Cited by Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, pp. 101-02.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, p. 102.

<sup>68</sup> This debate plays out in the articles collected in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).



to be credible. Austin argues that, as well as describing a state of affairs (constative utterances), language can be used to *produce* a state of affairs, to effect 'real-life' changes (performative utterances). A very clear and simple example of this is what is uttered by bride and groom during a wedding ceremony. The vows spoken are performative; they change the marital status of the couple, binding them together in the eyes of the law or of the church. However, the distinction between the 'serious' and 'non-serious' use of language is required if we are to explain how an actor or actress, onstage in a play, use the same words in declaring the marriage vows and exchange rings *without* being married.<sup>69</sup>

It is not that Derrida wishes to attack Austin or condemn speech act theory. On the contrary, he very much admires Austin, recognizing the idea of the performative as an extremely productive way of thinking about language and literature. Indeed, Derrida's own texts as well as those he reads are often performative; they not only describe but also transform other texts. However, if we return to our above example of marriage vows, we see that for Derrida there are a number of problems with speech act theory. He first takes issue with Austin's recourse to non-linguistic conditions in order for the performative to be what he, Austin, calls 'successful' or 'felicitous'<sup>70</sup> – i.e., that both parties are single, the presence of witnesses and a minister or official with the power to marry, and so on. Derrida has certain reservations about the fact that Austin must ultimately invoke the intentions of the bride and groom or anyone making a performative utterance, and we will come to the question of intentionality in a moment. However, more specifically,

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<sup>69</sup> Culler also uses the example of wedding vows in his explication of performative language. See *Literary Theory*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>70</sup> J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 22.

his objection has to do with Austin's insistence that serious uses of language can be rigorously defined and opposed to non-serious utterances. In *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin says:

Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'? This is, though vague, true enough in general – it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem.<sup>71</sup>

Austin asserts that a marriage simulated in the course of a play would be an instance of the non-serious use of language. Once again a hierarchy is established wherein the serious use of language is to be preferred to the non-serious use, which is regarded as inessential, a secondary effect or a grafting of non-serious uses onto the primary serious use. The non-serious uses are described by Austin as 'parasitic', and he employs other metaphors of illness and infection which remind us of the *pharmakon*:

as *utterances* our performances are *also* heir to certain other kinds of ill, which infect *all* utterances. [...] a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or if spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not *seriously* [Derrida's emphasis], but in many ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be regarded as issued in ordinary circumstances.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22. See *Marges de la philosophie*, pp. 386-87.

Derrida points out that: 'C'est aussi comme un "parasite" que l'écriture a toujours été traitée par la tradition philosophique, et l'approchement n'a rien ici d'hasardeux.'<sup>73</sup>

In a move familiar to us from the above discussion of Plato and Rousseau, he shows how the logic of supplementarity is also at work here. In the same way as writing, the so-called secondary, derivative form of language, turns out to open up the very possibility of living speech, so too do the non-serious uses of language make serious utterances possible. This is due to what Derrida refers to as the 'general iterability' of language. If it were not possible to repeat linguistic utterances in other contexts – and this applies to both 'serious' and 'non-serious' repetitions – they would no longer function as language but rather as what Culler describes as marks 'inextricably tied to a physical situation'.<sup>74</sup> 'Serious' and 'non-serious' utterances are merely different versions of the functioning of language. So when Novalis says that the 'serious people' who have a hatred for language, 'merken ihren Muthwillen, merken aber nicht, daß das verächtliche Schwatzen die unendlich ernsthafte Seite der Sprache ist', we are reminded of Derrida's insistence that, as with a generalized writing, jokes and quotations are not parasites or inessential supplements to 'serious' language. On the contrary, the possibility of using words in non-serious contexts actually constitutes the very possibility of serious utterances.

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 387.

<sup>74</sup> Culler, *Literary Theory*, p. 99.

## Intention

In more general terms, it is the assumption that language can be used to refer simply and directly which both Derrida and Novalis question. This brings us back to intention, and 'Monolog' helps to shed more light on this question. We have not really asked so far whether Novalis seems to be talking about what people *say* or what they *write*. Now it might easily be argued that the text concerns the functioning of language in general. In the same way I said just now that 'Novalis seems to be "talking" about what people say' even though 'Monolog' is a written text, describing writers as 'talking' and 'saying' is very common and, indeed, common sense. This is further complicated by the fact that this written text is entitled 'Monolog' – a monologue is usually a spoken discourse. I am not trying to split hairs here but, rather, to make a serious point about intentionality. Keeping in mind Derrida's deconstruction of the speech/writing opposition, we see that Novalis is concerned with the intentions of those people who *want* to speak of something determinate. As well as recognizing that this 'something determinate' is by its very nature anterior to language, we also see that the intention itself is held to be pre-linguistic, the manifestation of an impulse, idea or thought which is the *logos* itself or, at least, closer to the *logos* than even living speech, and much closer than writing for the reasons we outlined above. If we look again at 'Monolog', even though Novalis does not explicitly identify 'die launige Sprache' with writing, this temperamental or capricious language leads intentions astray in precisely the same way as 'archi-écriture', the generalized writing which Derrida reveals as dislocating the speaking, and intending, subject even as it constitutes this subject. Temperamental language

makes fun of the intention to use it just as the subject is 'tormented' by its signs. However, this does not mean that intention should be discounted entirely. There would be very little point in writing or speaking at all if this were the case. 'Monolog', in that it sets up an alternative between two ways of using language, clearly indicates that, for Novalis, language *can* be used. We have no choice but to use language. Instead, what is called into question by 'Monolog' is the assumption that this intention can be *fully* realized; that language can be used determinately in order to give direct access to forms of plenitude such as truth, reality or the unmediated experience of 'things'.

As for Derrida, it has often been claimed that he has no interest in what the writer of a text might have 'meant' at the time of writing. However, this is a somewhat misleading assumption based perhaps on an over-hasty identification of Derrida with Roland Barthes and his famous statement on the 'death of the author'. Nicholas Royle takes issue with this misconception, pointing out that:

at least as early as 1976 we can hear Derrida speaking out against the Barthesian phrase. In *Signéponge*, for instance, Derrida refers to 'that death or omission of the author of which, as is certainly the case, too much of a case has been made'.<sup>75</sup>

In 'Toward an Ethic of Discussion', Derrida takes issue with Searle's contention that the deconstruction of the serious/non-serious opposition is

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<sup>75</sup> Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 7. Royle cites Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, p. 22. *Signéponge* was first given as a lecture at a colloquium on Ponge held at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1975 and was first published in its full form in the bilingual edition I use here: Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

tantamount to accusing those who speak of intentionality as being in the grip of a 'longing for metaphysical plenitude':

It is not accurate, [...] to suggest that anyone who uses the word 'intentionality' 'invests intention with the *longing* for metaphysical plenitude'. Nor did I ever say so. Nevertheless, if one wishes to speak rigorously of an intentional structure one should take into account, with or without 'longing', the *telos* of plenitude that constitutes it. [...] This plenitude (this 'fulfillment'), for reasons I have already stated (iterability, structure of the trace and of the mark in general), is already inaccessible in perception or in intuition in general as the experience of a present content.<sup>76</sup>

But even without statements as explicit as these, Derrida's reading of Rousseau makes clear that the intention of the writer is not to be discounted. Even though Rousseau recognizes the power of death at the heart of speech, which dislocates the subject, Derrida shows that he is 'néanmoins plus pressé de la conjurer que d'en assumer la nécessité'. The strange double movement of elevating and disqualifying writing at the same time demonstrates that blindness to the supplement is inevitable. The author is – in the most essential way – blind to some aspects of what the text seems to say. If the 'dangerous supplement' demonstrates anything, it is that the text has the ability to say something other than what the writer *meant* or, as Novalis puts it, language can make him or her say 'das lächerlichste und verkehrteste Zeug'. But rather than say that every attempt to speak determinately is doomed to failure, 'Monolog' demonstrates – as Derrida would say, with 'a certain laughter'<sup>77</sup> – a way of speaking or writing which allows for the articulation of something meaningful while nonetheless recognizing that the endless *différance* of the trace prevents the (re)constitution of a single, stable meaning as both origin and telos of language.

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<sup>76</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 121.

<sup>77</sup> See Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, p. 29.

So how, according to Novalis, does one avoid ‘speaking determinately’ and ‘speak in order to speak’? Here he seems to be talking about ‘Poesie’ and contrasting it to determinate – we could also say ‘philosophical’ – language. By ‘contrasting’, I do not mean to imply that Novalis wishes to set up a clear and watertight distinction between determinate and ‘poetic’ language. These are placed in a certain relation to each another but, as we shall see in a moment, it is not a question of a stable or hierarchical opposition. Likening language to mathematical formulae, he says:

Nur durch ihre Freiheit sind sie Glieder der Natur und nur in ihren freien Bewegungen äußert sich die Weltseele und macht sie zu einem zarten Maaßstab und Grundriß der Dinge. So ist es auch mit der Sprache – wer ein feines Gefühl ihrer Applicatur, ihres Takts, ihres musikalischen Geistes hat, wer in sich das zarte Wirken ihrer innern Natur vernimmt, und danach seine Zunge oder seine Hand bewegt, der wird ein Prophet sein, dagegen wer es wohl weiß, aber nicht Ohr und Sinn genug für sie hat, Wahrheiten wie diese schreiben, aber von der Sprache selbst zum Besten gehalten und von den Menschen, wie Cassandra von den Trojanern, verspottet werden wird.

This would seem to suggest that philosophy’s insistence that language can be *used*, in order to locate the truth, to pinpoint or ‘grasp’ the absolute by force, is precisely that which blocks access to insights which might be achieved in other ways: any apparent truths that emerge will only be ‘mocked’ by language. Novalis actually says elsewhere: ‘Offenbarungen lassen sich nicht mit Gewalt erzwingen.’<sup>78</sup> Trying to bend language, to make an instrument of it, reveals only the incompatibility of discourse and the absolute, as we saw clearly in our discussion of Levinas and a ‘violent metaphysics’. Allowing language freedom to move the speaker, letting language express its own wonderful musical nature, might make a ‘prophet’ of the

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<sup>78</sup> N III, p. 601, ‘Fragmente und Studien 1799/1800: Physicalische Bemerkungen, no. 291.



speaker. But, of course, by trying to say this in determinate fashion Novalis's text takes on the form of an aporia, setting up an undecidable oscillation between the two alternatives. This is the most interesting aspect of the text in terms both of its status as an excellent example of Romantic literature and of its interest for poststructuralism. Novalis draws attention to the fact that 'Monolog' itself can be read as an instance of 'speaking for the sake of things':

Wenn ich damit das Wesen und Amt der Poesie auf das deutlichste angegeben zu haben glaube, so weiß ich doch, daß es kein Mensch verstehen kann, und ich ganz was albernes gesagt habe, weil ich es habe sagen wollen, und so keine Poesie zu Stande kommt.

So we find ourselves left with a certain paradoxical undecidability, through which, as Novalis says, he may well have produced literature 'ohne [s]ein Wissen und Glauben'.

### ***Signéponge*: Signing (Im)properly**

We will return to the question of never-ending undecidability in the following chapter on nonclosure and self-referentiality. But now I want to turn briefly to *Signéponge*, Derrida's reading of Francis Ponge, because it offers further insight into the problems of reference and respect for language which have been opened by our reading of 'Monolog'. If 'Monolog' seems to say that the only chance of producing literature is born of the attempt to avoid 'speaking for the sake of things', *Signéponge* turns the logic of the 'thing' upside down by inviting us to look at the *text* as a thing.



This idea of the text as ‘thing’ is not to be confused with the objectifying moves of philosophy which we discussed in Chapter 1, especially with regard to Levinas. The whole point about the ‘thing’ is that it cannot be objectified or fully rendered into philosophical or critical discourse. Derrida says:

La chose serait donc l’autre, l’autre-chose qui me donne un ordre ou m’adresse une demande impossible, intransigeante, insatiable, sans échange et sans transaction, sans contrat impossible. Sans un mot, sans *me* parler, elle s’adresse à moi, à moi seul dans mon irremplaçable singularité, dans ma solitude aussi. À la chose je dois un respect absolu que me médiatise aucune loi générale: la loi de la chose, c’est aussi la singularité. À elle me lie une dette infinie, un devoir sans fond. Je ne m’en acquitterai jamais. La chose n’est donc pas un objet, elle ne peut le devenir.<sup>79</sup>

Novalis’s statement, cited at the beginning of this chapter, that ‘Kritik der Poesie ist ein Unding’ can be seen in terms of this infinite respect for the ‘thing-ness’ or otherness of the text – ‘une dette infinie, un devoir sans fond’. The text resists explication, assimilation into the general discourse of criticism. The infinite debt to the singularity of the literary text makes it particularly difficult for Derrida to discuss the work of Ponge, and we are back again with the problem of (mis)reading. I do not want to read Derrida reading Ponge (who is, of course, also reading himself). Instead, I am going to look briefly at the slightly more general discussion in *Signéponge* of the text as signature, because the analysis of the text’s singularity gives us a different perspective on the literature/philosophy opposition.

Both Ponge and Derrida play on the double meaning of the word ‘propre’ in French. It can mean both ‘clean’, and also ‘proper’, in the sense of belonging to,

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<sup>79</sup> Derrida, *Signéponge*, p. 15.

owned by – in this second sense, we also have to keep an eye on that which is distinctive or singular, as well as that which is *appropriate*. Derrida says of Ponge: ‘il aura spéculé comme personne sur le propre, le proprement écrire et le proprement signer. Ne séparant plus, dans le propre, les deux tiges de la *propreté* et la *propriété*.’<sup>80</sup> The ambiguity of the word ‘propre’ gives Ponge the means – through ‘l’affinité [...] entre texte et tissu’<sup>81</sup> – to create an entire network of images relating to ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ ways of writing or signing.

Bringing us back to the literature/philosophy opposition, Derrida cites Ponge, from *Pages bis*: “‘Si je préfère La Fontaine – la moindre fable – à Schopenhauer ou Hegel, je sais bien pourquoi. Ça me paraît bien: 1. moins fatigant, plus plaisant; 2. plus propre, moins dégoûtant [...]’.”<sup>82</sup> Derrida asks why philosophers would – apart from all their other ‘insuffisances’ – be unclean or ‘disgusting’, and suggests that:

une des raisons pour lesquelles peut-être les philosophes en tant que philosophes sont un peu dégoûtants, c’est que pas un, en tant que philosophe, car ça fait partie de la philosophie, n’aura su trancher, s’arrêter (d’où le caractère ‘volumenplusieurstomineux’ de leur oeuvre [...]), couper pour faire court et signer. Pour signer il faut arrêter son texte et aucun philosophe n’aura signé son texte, résolument, singulièrement, parlé en son nom avec tous les risques que cela comporte. Chaque philosophe dénie l’idiome de son nom, de sa langue, de sa circonstance, parle par concepts et généralités nécessairement impropres.<sup>83</sup>

Seeking to speak in concepts and generalities would be analogous to what Novalis describes as ‘von etwas Bestimmten sprechen’. Trying to speak of something

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<sup>80</sup> Derrida, *Signéponge*, p. 29.

<sup>81</sup> See *Signéponge*, p. 37.

<sup>82</sup> Ponge, *Pages bis* from *Proems*. Cited by Derrida, *Signéponge*, p. 33.

<sup>83</sup> Derrida, *Signéponge*, p. 33.

determinate or something generally and universally valid, is in other words, to attempt to render the surface as transparent as possible – one tries to deny the *différance* of language which permanently defers the closing of the gap between signifier and signified. *Différance* helps us to think about this alterity of the text which is also – but not only – the alterity of language itself. Derrida often uses the idea of ‘the trace’ to express the functioning of *différance*. In Chapter 1, we discussed Saussure’s description of language as a ‘system of differences without positive terms.’ Put simply, every element in language is marked by the trace of the elements which are not present. But because of the *différance* of language, these elements are not *simply absent*; they are not elsewhere, have never been in themselves present. As Bennington puts it: ‘Every trace is the trace of a trace.’<sup>84</sup>

As Ponge sees it, the manipulation of language involved in bending it towards concepts and generalities, soils the words, makes them unclean by denying their absolute otherness and their ‘properness’. Novalis, in the ‘Logologische Fragmente’, contrasts the philosopher’s love of generalities with the poet’s respect for language: ‘Wenn der Philosoph nur alles ordnet, alles stellt, so löste der Dichter alle Bände auf. Seine Worte sind nicht allgemeine Zeichen – Töne sind es – Zauberworte, die schöne Gruppe um sich her bewegen.’<sup>85</sup> The philosopher’s language is necessarily improper because he denies the idiom and textuality of his text. And, according to Derrida, he does this precisely by refusing to *sign*. In the introduction, we discussed the question of readings and misreadings, and the idea that the possibility of the text is only opened by the reading of the other. Derrida often describes this possibility in terms of

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<sup>84</sup> Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, p. 75.

<sup>85</sup> N II, p. 533, ‘Logologische Fragmente’, no. 32.

the signature. In the same way, as the signature on a travellers' cheque is only validated by the countersignature, the text as signature always already awaits the countersignature of the reader. We must now begin to consider ways in which Novalis and Derrida admire – indeed, try to produce – the kind of writing which tries to account for the singularity of the other who signs, for the alterity of language, and examine whether, as Bennington puts it, more than philosophy 'literature can give an idea of a probity or frankness in the negotiation of this singularity and the letting-be of the other thing in its alterity.'<sup>86</sup> In the next chapter, we will turn to ways in which literature signs, remarks itself as literature, through a number of operations and strategies which admit to the radical alterity of language, acknowledging the drift of its *différance*.

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<sup>86</sup> Bennington, 'Derridabase', p. 187.

## Chapter 3

### Nonclosure and Self-referentiality

**‘Der Schluß des Buchs schien zu fehlen.’<sup>1</sup>**

Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*

**‘Différance jusqu’à la mort, pour la mort, sans fin parce que finie.’<sup>2</sup>**

Derrida, ‘Préjugés: Devant la loi’

#### Nonclosure

In Chapter 1, we considered the early Romantics’ insights into the impossibility of conceptualizing the absolute and of grounding a general and absolute system. This philosophical pretension to universality and generality is one of the main targets of deconstruction, and, as we saw in the second chapter, Derrida and Novalis demonstrate that it is the *différance* of language – more clearly re-marked by the case of writing – which prevents the realizing of philosophy’s aim. Novalis’s ‘Monolog’ has helped us begin to explore ways in which the (literary) text can thematize, in what Derrida calls ‘undecidable strokes’, the impossibility of using language to refer in a direct and simple manner or fully represent anterior realities. However, we are not done with philosophy and we are certainly not finished with representation. Saying this, I do not mean simply to point to the structure of my thesis, but to make a more fundamental point, namely that the questioning of the possibility of representation does not end – but neither does representation itself. Having broached

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<sup>1</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, ‘Préjugés: Devant la loi’, in Derrida, V. Descombes et al., *La faculté de juger* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 122. Hereafter ‘Devant la loi’.

the question of whether literature might have more chance than philosophy of respecting the alterity of the absolutely other, and of acknowledging the *différance* which prevents the transparency of signifier to signified, we must try to identify deliberate strategies through which the literary text takes account of *différance* by signing, by remarking itself *as language*, and by challenging what Novalis describes as the belief in ‘wahrhafte, vollständige Repraesentation.’<sup>3</sup>

Nonclosure, one of the words which entitles or frames this third chapter, is not strictly Derrida’s own term. Geoffrey Bennington argues that Derrida’s use of the word ‘la clôture’ has often been too hastily assimilated with ‘la fin’. I would suggest that this confusion has led to the term ‘nonclosure’, which is used by critics such as Kuzniar to describe the constitutive open-endedness of a text, or the way in which the arrival at an ultimate meaning is deferred. When Derrida speaks of the ‘closure’ of metaphysics, he always stresses that it is necessary to distinguish between ‘the closure’ and ‘the end’. ‘Closure’ does not mean *simply* ‘end’. In the interview with Henri Ronse, Derrida points out that in *De la grammatologie*, ‘une distinction se proposait entre *la clôture* et *la fin*. Ce qui est pris dans la clôture dé-limitée peut continuer indéfiniment.’<sup>4</sup> The above quotation alerts us to the fact that the word ‘closure’ can also designate a certain ordering of *space*, as in ‘enclosure’, that which separates a space from its outside. Derrida’s ‘closure’, however, is not the clear demarcation between inside and outside – there is nothing outside, nothing beyond the closure. We see that, as with questions of philosophy and representation, the question of boundaries has not been left behind in Chapter 2. In Derrida’s essay on

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<sup>3</sup> N III, p. 397, ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 685.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, interview with Henri Ronse, in *Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), p. 23.

Artaud,<sup>5</sup> the word ‘clôture’ also figures in the sense of enclosure, as a kind of circular limit of the endless repetition of differences which constitutes representation:

Parce qu’elle a toujours déjà commencé, la représentation n’a donc pas de fin. Mais on peut penser la clôture de ce qui n’a pas de fin. La clôture est la limite circulaire à l’intérieur de laquelle la répétition de la différence se répète indéfiniment. C’est-à-dire son espace de *jeu*.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that difference and representation have always already begun mean that, in a sense, ‘closure’ is ‘nonclosure’.

However, there is good reason for employing the word ‘nonclosure’, even though Derrida does not do so himself. It is one theme which has hitherto attracted a good deal of attention from critics. Kuzniar’s study of nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin, *Delayed Endings*, is one example of this type of criticism. Two other critics who are interested in nonclosure, without employing the word itself, are Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. In their poststructuralist study of German Romantic theory, *L’absolu littéraire*,<sup>7</sup> they accord great importance to fragmentariness and incompleteness as ways of articulating the dynamics of early Romantic theory and literature. In this chapter I would like to present and examine some of the findings of Kuzniar, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy because their analyses of nonclosure and the fragment will help to identify some of the various strategies for deferring closure. I said in the introduction that any comparison of the writings of Novalis and Derrida – or indeed any criticism which seeks to bring together

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, pp. 341-68.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 367.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

Romanticism and poststructuralist thought – must be constantly vigilant against the tendency to ‘apply’ the theories of one to the other. While this, of course, is also the case in the other chapters of my thesis, it is particularly important to bear it in mind in connection with nonclosure, precisely because of the intense critical interest in that theme. There is always a risk in employing (poststructuralist) terms like nonclosure and radical temporality because, as we have seen, these structures and strategies already characterize many German Romantic texts. Nonclosure is, however, a very useful term for describing the ways in which even texts which are overtly self-referential permanently defer a closure which would result in an ultimate, neat and absolute self-mirroring. Derrida uses the phrase: ‘Ça boite et ça ferme mal.’<sup>8</sup>

I want to say a few words now on the connection between nonclosure and *différance*. As we have seen, *différance* is more than just a way of describing Saussure’s ‘differences’ between signifiers; it also tries to name the ‘differentiality’ of difference; the being-different-from-itself of language; that which makes differences possible. At the same time, *différance* describes the deferral through which meaning is always to come or is re-established after the event: each and every element is marked by the trace of a past and future which themselves will never have been present. Nonclosure shares many of the features of *différance*, but where *différance* is necessary and constitutive of all language, nonclosure is an active strategy for thematizing it – for re-marking it. As we saw in our consideration of Rousseau, the re-mark describes an aspect of a text whereby an essential or constitutive feature is revealed more clearly; marked again, so to speak. Looking

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1980), p. 418.



ahead to the following chapter, the idea of death, for instance, comes to re-mark our relation with the living other by shedding 'more light' on the essential separation which always already constitutes this relationship with the other. With Rousseau the general iterability of language is re-marked in the written; writing underlines the essential *différance* which always already constitutes living speech as much as writing. Here in Chapter 3, it is a matter of identifying active strategies for deferring closure – or, more accurately – for thematizing or playing with the *différance* which is a constitutive feature of all texts. Nonclosure and the re-mark are remarkably productive and economical terms for conceptualizing these strategies which, by their very nature, are elusive. They are themselves caught up in the very *différance* which they seek to thematize.

Nonclosure creates certain practical difficulties. In the introduction we discussed readings and misreadings and the inherent possibility that any text may give rise to different readings. *All* texts, as Derrida says, are open to deconstructive or 'non-transcendent' readings.<sup>9</sup> But I also suggested that the texts of Novalis and Derrida are more susceptible than other texts to giving rise to different, even conflicting, readings. This is directly related to nonclosure. On the most basic level, the fact that both Novalis and Derrida are practitioners of nonclosure means that the fragmentariness of their texts invites extrapolation and explication, and the open-endedness leaves room for critics to impose their own forms of ideological closure. That the texts open further avenues of thought is, of course, not a bad thing.

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<sup>9</sup> See Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature' in *Acts of Literature: A Derrida Reader*, ed. by Derek Attridge (in particular, pp. 44-48, where the idea of 'literature' is analysed with regard to the question of whether some texts might be privileged by Derrida as being more interesting than others).

Novalis's statement, 'Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor sein',<sup>10</sup> is integral to all of his work – indeed, it is one of the most important characteristics of Romantic 'Poesie' – and this sort of reader involvement is welcomed by him, and also by Friedrich Schlegel and the other early Romantics. Novalis insists in the 'Teplitzer Fragmente' that: 'Es giebt kein *allgemeingeltendes Lesen*, im gewöhnlichen Sinn. Lesen ist eine freye Operation.'<sup>11</sup> As we have seen in relation to Ponge and (mis)readings, this does not mean that a reader can simply say *anything* about a text – Derrida reminds us that we are in a certain debt to the text – but it certainly suggests that reading is (or ought to be) receptive to *all* the ways of reading a text, even if these are apparently contradictory. Critics who adhere strongly to a preconceived framework simply cannot uncover the paradoxes and apparent contradictions through which widely differing readings may emerge. In many of Derrida's texts we find the same fragmentariness and elliptical formulations that are to be found in the works of Novalis. Some critics do not do justice to the dense richness of Derrida's prose, in which several, at times opposing, meanings reverberate throughout. Some commentators like to dismiss the wordplays and multiple meanings as inessential ornamentation – even as a form of showing off – and they seem to see the playfulness as interfering with the content or 'message' of the texts. Richard Rorty writes: 'The most shocking thing about Derrida's work is his use of multilingual puns, joke etymologies, allusions from anywhere to anywhere, and phonic and typographical gimmicks.'<sup>12</sup> And Geoffrey Bennington recognizes that a certain 'demand for play and dance' in the works of Derrida is perceived by

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<sup>10</sup> N II, p. 470, 'Vermischte Bemerkungen', no. 125.

<sup>11</sup> N II, p. 609, no. 398 ('Teplitzer-Fragment no. 79').

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida', *New Literary History*, 10 (1978), 141-60 (146-47).

some as ‘a virtuoso and sophisticated manipulation of paradoxes and puns, which takes pleasure in mocking a whole metaphysical tradition [...]’<sup>13</sup> The puns and multiple meanings are regarded as irritating detours which interrupt the process the goal of which is resolution and a synthesis which would be entirely transparent and accessible to discursivity. Even though Novalis’s writing is less semantically dense than Derrida’s, some critics refuse to acknowledge the subtle irony which permeates many of his texts and the way in which certain narrative operations defer the arrival at a final and unequivocal meaning. But, of course, the contradictory moments in the Novalissian text mean that the desire for resolution is not only understandable but, to an extent, inevitable. As I said in the introduction, I am as guilty as any critic of reading in *my* way. In attempting to show ways in which the writing of Novalis defers closure, I hope that it will be sufficiently clear that reading Novalis in this way is only part of the story. The large body of Novalis criticism testifies to this in the conflicting readings it has produced.

## The Finished Fragment

In *L’absolu littéraire*, first published in 1978, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy are concerned with outlining the continuing relevance of German Romantic literature and philosophy in relation to both poststructuralist theory and German Idealism. This broadly philosophical slant means that they tend to focus more on the Romantics’ collaborative efforts, such as the *Athenäum* Fragments and

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<sup>13</sup> Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, in Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 41.

the anonymous text, 'Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus', and on the fragments of Friedrich Schlegel, whom they regard as the Romantic theorist *par excellence*. However, although they do not spend much time analysing the writings of Novalis, some of their remarks on the 'finished fragment' are useful and illuminating for our discussion of nonclosure in Novalis and Derrida.

While it is true that the Jena Romantics did not invent the fragment as such, it is nevertheless 'le genre dans lequel sont écrits les textes sans doute les plus célèbres des Romantiques d'Iéna, le genre auquel leur nom est à peu près inévitablement associé'.<sup>14</sup> And Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy go even further:

Plus même que le 'genre' du romantisme théorique, le fragment est considéré comme son incarnation, la marque la plus distinctive de son originalité et le signe de sa radicale modernité.<sup>15</sup>

They point out that critics have, at times, cited extracts of the Romantics' posthumous writings and referred to these as 'fragments' without making clear whether 'il s'agit d'ébauches interrompues ou de fragments destinés à la publication comme tels'.<sup>16</sup> They continue:

On entretient ainsi – et parfois on exploite – une indistinction entre, disons, le morceau frappé par inachèvement et celui qui vise à la fragmentation pour elle-même. On laisse ainsi dans une pénombre propice l'essentiel de ce que ce genre implique: le fragment comme propos déterminé et délibéré, assumant ou transfigurant l'accidentel et l'involuntaire de la fragmentation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, pp. 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

This reminds us of the long-standing critical debate as to whether Novalis *intended* to complete his novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Such speculation becomes less relevant once one considers the ways in which the novel contains the seeds of its own incompleteness. While it is certainly not in the form of fragments intended, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it above, for publication as such,<sup>18</sup> *Ofterdingen* is not only ‘struck’ by fragmentation but reveals an intrinsic fragmentariness. Using terms which will be familiar from the discussion of speech act theory, we might say that the fragmentariness of *Ofterdingen* is essential rather than accidental. One of Derrida’s texts from *Psyche: Invention de l’autre*, ‘L’aphorisme à contretemps’, also complicates the distinction between the accidental and the essential. In this reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, Derrida asks whether it is merely an unfortunate accident that messages can and do go astray, as with the Friar’s ill-fated letter, ‘L’aphorisme à contretemps’, a text which is clearly self-referential in that it is itself a series of aphorisms, will play a role later in the chapter, as well as in Chapter 4, and I have provided the complete text in the appendix.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, too, remind us that the Romantic fragment possesses a necessary, rather than an accidental, incompleteness achieved paradoxically by its (premature) completion. Unlike the fragmentary texts which are the remainders of antiquity, Romantic fragments are not textual ruins recalling what is lost or

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<sup>18</sup> In an essay entitled ‘The Early Romantic Fragment and Incompleteness’, Haynes Horne finds Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s distinction between fragments published in the author’s lifetime and posthumously published fragments less relevant when one considers the conventions and restraints of publishing itself: ‘The contingency of publication, the same in today’s literary market as in the *Athenäum*’s market – a successful veto by another group member, the lack of space, time, and money, or pressures by powerful literary figures to abandon the mode altogether should be scarcely allowed to determine a fragment’s status as a ‘romantic fragment’. Horne, ‘The Early Romantic Fragment and Incompleteness’, in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. by Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 289–313 (p. 299).

sketching ‘l’unité vivante d’une grande individualité, oeuvre ou auteur’.<sup>19</sup> The finished fragment, by virtue of its constitutive incompleteness – interruption which is also continuation – is a particularly appropriate articulation of the Romantic project, the perfect form for a poetry the essence of which is that, as in ‘*Athenäums-Fragment*’ 116, it should forever be becoming and never be perfected: ‘Die Romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; das ist ja ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann.’<sup>20</sup> In this context, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy examine the way in which fragment relates to *totality*. Fragmentary totality is neither located at any particular point nor can the fragment, as we have already said, be regarded as a detached piece of a totality, but rather totality is simultaneously in the whole and in each part.<sup>21</sup> They continue:

Chaque fragment vaut pour lui-même et pour ce dont il se détache. La totalité, c’est le fragment lui-même dans son individualité achevée. C’est donc identiquement la totalité plurielle des fragments, qui ne compose pas un tout [...], mais qui réplique le tout, le fragmentaire lui-même, en chaque fragment. [...] Les fragments sont au fragment ses définitions, et c’est ce qui installe sa totalité comme pluralité, et son achèvement comme inachèvement de son infinité.<sup>22</sup>

This final sentence summarizes neatly the role of the finished fragment in subverting the idea of the system. A system is not a system unless it is complete. And it cannot be complete without determining the ‘Grundsatz’, absolute origin *and* an absolutely achievable end-point. At the end of the previous chapter, I cited Derrida’s allusion to the ‘volumenplusieurstomineux’ character of the philosopher’s text; the philosopher

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<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-), vol. II, p. 183, ‘*Athenäums-Fragmente*’, no. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

who does not know when to stop or cut short his text ('couper pour faire court et signer'), who refuses to sign 'properly' and acknowledge its very textuality: 'Pour signer il faut arrêter son texte et aucun philosophe n'aura signé son texte, résolument, singulièrement, parlé en son nom avec tous les risques que cela comporte.'<sup>23</sup> Writing in fragments and aphorisms can be regarded as a way of signing 'properly', of admitting to the textuality of the text. The fragment and the fragmentary series are in a sense, by virtues of their form, themselves definitions of the fragment; they thus remark the impossibility of totality. Paradoxically, their premature completion is continuation itself. The idea of continuation by means of interruption will be vital to our reading of Novalis's longer texts. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are keen to point out that the aphorism or finished fragment is not the only form which is fragmentary. Although they are here referring in general to Romantic theoretical texts in continuous prose, we shall see later how this applies to *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which is also the theory of itself, and, in spite of its continuous prose, exemplifies the fragmentary. We must bear in mind, then, that the finished fragment is not the only means of achieving nonclosure in a text. Nonclosure can also be a feature of narrative. A text which appears to consist of continuous prose can, in a number of ways, *actively* defer a final interpretation and thematize the inevitable failure to identify an ultimate meaning. But, before coming to nonclosure in longer texts, I want to turn once more to Novalis's theoretical fragments – his aphoristic and speculative reflections on a wide range of topics – because these provide valuable insight into his strategies for evading closure in a longer narrative text such as *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 33.



## Fragments on Fragments

Kuzniar identifies several main aspects of Novalis's theoretical fragments which foreshadow his methods of circumventing closure in the novel. The first of these is to be found in his musings on the nature of the fragment itself. This sort of meta-commentary is analogous to Romantic or modern literature's putting to work of the question of its own conditions of possibility. The early Romantics insist that the fragmentary statement, while it does call for further thought on the part of the reader, cannot be *fully* completed by the reader. The title of Novalis's collection of fragments published in Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäum* journal bears the title 'Blüthenstaub' ('Grains of Pollen'). This title, which makes us think of Derridean 'dissemination', testifies to the fragment's capacity to excite further thought and reflection. However, the Romantics also insist that the fragment is entirely self-contained and separate from its surroundings. Schlegel's famous comparison of the fragment to a hedgehog is an excellent illustration of this paradox: 'Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerk von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel.'<sup>24</sup> While, the hedgehog is, indeed, separate from its surroundings, its spines reach out in different directions, just as the fragment points toward the various avenues of thought which it opens. The fragment, therefore, must not be regarded as a mere section or 'Bruchstück' of a temporal continuum which can be reconstructed in its entirety. As Kuzniar puts it: 'The fragment signifies present deficiency or incompleteness that categorically rejects future

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<sup>24</sup> Schlegel, vol. II, p. 197, '*Athenäums-Fragmente*', no. 206.

closure.’<sup>25</sup> The fragment is thus ‘mystisch’,<sup>26</sup> according to Friedrich Schlegel, in that it openly admits the incompatibility of language with the absolute. It can allude to a possible future state while resisting ultimate interpretation.

The status of the absolute or the ideal forms the second strand through which Novalis articulates the impossibility and undesirability of closure. As we saw in the two previous chapters, any ideal – such as the perfect self-identity of the ego, the attainment of truth, or an ultimate transcendental meaning (all of which can be subsumed under the Derridean category of *présence*) – is totally inaccessible to language, thought and philosophy. The self, for example, can only be defined through activity, and Novalis argues that it is through this activity (‘Handeln’) that we discover that that which we are seeking is unattainable *and yet necessary*. Later we will consider the important difference between temporalization and temporality, between the virtual ideal in Novalis and the approximative ideals of Enlightenment philosophy, which, while it admits to the impossibility of achieving the ideal, still conceives of it as a kind of regulatory idea, one which points in the right direction, so to speak, and ensures a continuous forward movement towards it. In the texts of Novalis, though he sometimes refers to the concept of a regulatory idea, it is made clear that the ideal is *fictional*. As Kuzniar points out, when he does use imagery which seems to invoke a perfect state, we discover that the ciphers on which he depends – the golden age or the millennium – do not reveal anything concrete about the imagined state. Furthermore, I think that Kuzniar is right to maintain that Novalis does not use these terms vaguely or carelessly. They are ‘absolute metaphors that

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<sup>25</sup> Alice A. Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Schlegel, vol. III, p. 99.

escape exact definition and temporal specification. Their referentiality is opaque.’<sup>27</sup>

Instead of the absolute, we find explicitly fictional constructs and, while this does excite desire and promote change, the constructs do not function as regulatory ideals in the Kantian sense. Kuzniar puts it as follows:

In place of an absolute ending, then, Novalis substitutes an absence or extended lacuna. This postulated void at the end of time serves to incite change and to prolong stimulation and incentive (*Wirksamkeit* or *Reitz*). Hardenberg writes of an eternal *Reitz* which would cease to be if stilled.<sup>28</sup>

Novalis uses words such as ‘unendlich’, ‘ewig’ and ‘immer’ to modify, as Kuzniar puts it, ‘values which could rarely be construed as transcendent – concepts such as incitant, lack, history and time.’<sup>29</sup> Thus, the terms are not, as in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, directed towards perfection. Here we can detect the same double bind as in the other chapters of my thesis. Any absolute, be it perfection, self-identity or perfect communion with the totally-other, would (even if these were possible) mean the end of language, philosophy, time and desire. In the ‘Fichte-Studien’, Novalis insists that attainment of the absolute would mean the end of time: ‘[es ist] an und für sich ein Widerspruch, daß in der Zeit etwas geschehn solle, was alle Zeit aufhebt’. [...] Die Zeit kann nie aufhören [...]. Denken außer der Zeit ist ein Unding’.<sup>30</sup> In the very next fragment he refers explicitly to the golden age: ‘Es können goldne Zeiten erscheinen – aber sie bringen nicht das Ende der Dinge – das Ziel des Menschen ist nicht die goldne Zeit.’<sup>31</sup> And, as Derrida puts it neatly in *Limited Inc*, in a phrase

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<sup>27</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> N II, p. 269, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 564.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., no. 565.

which captures the aporia or double bind in which we find ourselves: 'Plenitude is the end (the goal), but were it attained, it would be the end (death).'<sup>32</sup>

This brings us to the third aspect identified by Kuzniar through which Novalis's writing resists closure – interruption and continuation. As I said above, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have pointed out that the fragment's incompleteness lies in its seemingly premature completion, its interruption. No incompleteness without completion, no continuation without interruption. Novalis puts it as follows: 'Im Unterbrechen liegt der Begriff des Fortsetzens, der Thätigkeit.'<sup>33</sup> This recalls Derrida's assertion in 'L'aphorisme à contretemps': 'Malgré les apparences, un aphorisme n'arrive jamais seul, il ne vient pas tout seul. Il appartient à une logique sérielle.'<sup>34</sup> Once more, we need to bear in mind that continuation does not imply an unending linear progression towards an absolute or a transcendental signified but rather a multi-directional, unending referral and deferral. Further on in the 'Fichte-Studien', Novalis takes up again the idea of continuation through interruption: 'Denn jede Reflexion setzt die andre voraus – Es ist Eine Handlung des Brechens.'<sup>35</sup>

Kuzniar argues that:

Novalis warns against interrupting, once and for all, the unending chain of affiliations between ideas. To prevent both the realization of perfection and referential closure, he instigates a *series* of interruptions and displacements.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, 'Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion', *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> N II, p. 203, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 284.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilee, 1987), p. 520.

<sup>35</sup> N II, p. 213, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 300.

<sup>36</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 83.

Many of Derrida's texts could be characterized as being full of 'interruptions and displacements'. 'L'aphorisme à contretemps' is one obvious example. In other texts, where the interruptions are less clearly related to structure, Derrida's argument is often circuitous, full of diversions, constantly changing direction and exploring the avenues of thought opened up by semantic or etymological multivalence. Of course, Derrida would probably disapprove of the word 'diversion' because it implies a detour which is not strictly necessary, which is somehow extraneous, diverting us from the 'proper' meaning of the text. For Derrida, the accidental always turns out to be the proper. In 'L'aphorisme à contretemps', a text which is truly remarkable for its combination of clarity and complexity, the displacements and interruptions of Derrida's other texts are more clearly re-marked by a self-referentiality which takes the form of an aphoristic series on aphorism itself. The clearly delimited breaks or interruptions, far from being merely stylistic or decorative, incite movement as one aphorism calls out to or recalls another – irrespective of numerical progression – across the white spaces in the text. As he says in the fourth aphorism of this beautifully self-referential text:

4. Un aphorisme expose à contretemps. Il expose le discours – le livre à contretemps. Littéralement – parce qu'il abandonne une parole à sa lettre. (Ceci pourrait déjà se lire comme une série d'aphorismes, l'alea d'une première anachronie. Au commencement, il y eut le contretemps. Au commencement, il y a la vitesse. La parole et l'acte sont *pris de vitesse*. L'aphorisme gagne de vitesse.)<sup>37</sup>

Here, Derrida is beginning to expand the meaning of the word 'aphorism'. In 'L'aphorisme à contretemps', more than simply describing a fragmentary statement,

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<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 519.

genre or form, the word ‘aphorisme’ draws together the ideas of dissociation and separation, as well as that of a temporal difference which is also conveyed by ‘contretemps’ – out of step, out of time. In this extended sense, ‘aphorism’ is always and already the very structure of language. Exposing language, it admits to the incompatibility of language and ultimate, transcendental meaning. This admission is the Romantic (and poststructuralist) prerequisite of all literature, in the specifically Romantic sense of the word. As I said in Chapter 2, many critics (including Derrida) have identified a particularly modern conception of literature as emerging in the Romantic era. But, as Romantics and poststructuralists alike point out, earlier writers such as Sterne and Shakespeare create self-referential literature, literary writing which plays with its status as literature and (particularly noticeable in the case of Sterne) conveys the constitutive open-endedness of all narrative.

To return to *Romeo and Juliet* and ‘L’aphorisme à contretemps’, Derrida reminds us that Shakespeare’s Friar Lawrence learns the danger of entrusting the ‘secret to letters’.<sup>38</sup> But Derrida equally demonstrates the inevitability of this; or rather Shakespeare’s play already shows that what brings about the lovers’ tragic end is by no means a peripheral plot twist. The fact that the Friar’s letters fail to reach their destination is no accident, but rather re-marks the essential possibility that, once entrusted to writing, meaning and intention can be lost, can arrive too soon or too late: ‘Le contretemps accidentel vient *remarquer* le contretemps essentiel.’<sup>39</sup> But, as

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. ‘Abandonner la parole, confier le secret à des lettres, c’est le stratagème du tiers, le médiateur, le Frère, le marieur qui, sans autre désir que le désir des autres, organise le contretemps. Il compte sur les lettres sans compter avec elles [...]’

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 523.

we have seen above, there would be no language and no desire without this essential contretemps:

Le désir de Roméo et Juliette n'a pas rencontré par hasard le poison, le contretemps ou le détour de la lettre. Pour que cette rencontre ait lieu, il fallait *déjà* instituer un système de marques [...] pour contrecarrer, si on peut dire, la dispersion des durées intérieures et hétérogènes, pour cadrer, organiser, mettre de l'ordre, rendre possible un rendez-vous: autrement dit pour dénier, en en prenant acte, la non-coïncidence, la séparation des monades, la distance infinie, la déconnexion des expériences, la multiplicité des mondes, tout ce qui rend possible un contretemps ou le détour irrémédiable d'une lettre. Mais le désir de Roméo et Juliette est né au coeur de cette possibilité. Il n'y aurait pas eu d'amour, le serment n'aurait pas eu lieu, ni le temps, ni son théâtre sans la discordance.<sup>40</sup>

Derrida demonstrates here the more general effects of aphorism and dissociation, their implications for 'real life'. The system of 'marks' through which we try to institute order in the multiplicity of the world and manage the chaos of time and space is what makes possible both the rendez-vous *and* the fact that Romeo and Juliet can and do fail to meet – they miss each other, arrive too soon or too late. Yet without the essential contretemps and aphoristic separation they would not desire coincidence or seek to share the living present of the other.

In 'aphorism' – both as a fragmentary statement and in the wider sense grafted onto the word by Derrida – we can glimpse the 'toujours-déjà' and recognize that an essential structural fragmentation is analogous to the aporetic, or radically temporal, structure of self-consciousness as described by Novalis. The fragment does not imply a lost but recoverable perfect state or absolute but neither does it imply the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 522.



*total* absence of the absolute. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy characterize the Romantic era as the age of chaos: 'Le chaos est en fait la situation de la "naïveté" toujours-déjà perdue et de l'art absolu jamais encore advenu, et en ce sens le chaos définit aussi bien la condition de l'homme [...]'.<sup>41</sup> And, discussing nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin, Alice Kuzniar says:

A desire to compensate for the initial lack, to attempt recuperation or to anticipate it, is what drives narrative forward. Differance, however, suspends accomplishment, prolongs desire, and thus generates nonclosure.<sup>42</sup>

There is no sense, as we have seen in the two previous chapters, in which either Derrida or Novalis could be said to articulate a straightforward negative theology or a belief in pure absence. Through the various strategies of nonclosure, they focus on the interim, the in-between, not upon that which remains hidden or absent. As Friedrich Schlegel puts it in the fragment to which I referred in Chapter 1:

Ein höchstes Häßliches [ist] offenbar so wenig möglich wie ein höchstes Schönes. Ein unbedingtes Maximum der Negation, oder das absolute Nichts kann so wenig wie ein unbedingtes Maximum der Position in irgendeiner Vorstellung gegeben werden.<sup>43</sup>

It is impossible to overstress this point. It lies at the heart of both Romanticism and poststructuralism and, as such, is vital to our comparison of Novalis and Derrida. Indeed, the close readings of texts in the earlier chapters have revealed the ever-present tension between desire for the absolute and the simultaneous awareness of its

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<sup>41</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Schlegel, vol. 1, p. 313.

fictionality (whence the *literary* absolute of Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's title). This tension, which the Romantics refer to as 'Schweben' or 'Wechselwirkung', is the essential structure of reading, of our interrelation with the other, and of the double bind of self-consciousness. Now, having begun with the not-so-humble fragment, we must turn to ways in which seemingly continuous prose can also embody fragmentariness and nonclosure.

## Secularization

Broadly speaking, the writings of both Novalis and Derrida testify to the constant oscillation between the drive towards closure and the undermining or questioning of the concept itself. The tension between these poles has had a clear impact on criticism and, as we have seen, produced widely differing interpretations through 'either/or' approaches to reading. Kuzniar, explaining how some critics have seen Novalis's work in terms of secularization, says:

Novalis makes his critics want to see in him a desire for closure, whether it be in the form of a teleology, in the images of organicism, or in the secular application of a sacred symbol but he equally challenges their findings.<sup>44</sup>

Kuzniar questions the concept of secularization in order to suggest a different way of reading which is governed by its recognition of a (temporal) relation to the ideal or the absolute. By secularization, she means a tendency of many eighteenth-century texts to endow (now empty) sacred or Christian symbols with the aims and goals of

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<sup>44</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, pp. 72-73.

the Enlightenment's *Vernunftsreligion*, such as the end of history, the possibility of perfection and the 'steadily progressive development of mankind'.<sup>45</sup> We need to keep this notion of linear progression in mind since it has implications not only for a concept of the history of mankind but also for a certain way of describing the functioning of any text. Kuzniar's reading implies that linear progression, movement from an origin to a telos, is perhaps an insufficient concept when applied to writers such as Novalis whose texts, much like those of Derrida, are the very embodiment of discontinuity and open-endedness.

### **Temporalization versus Temporality**

Kuzniar makes use of two terms in her exploration of the critical response to Novalis – 'temporalization' and 'temporality'. The former describes the structure of the Enlightenment notion of eternal progress. An ideal is conceived of or posited and this idea then assumes a regulatory function and can only be achieved by approximation. But, as she says of the ideal as progressive goal: 'Since such a structure of future time is still progressive, [...] it is yet far removed from the open-ended (because radically discontinuous) narrative advocated by Schlegel, Schelling, and Novalis.'<sup>46</sup> Given that early Romanticism has sometimes been regarded as a continuation of Enlightenment thinking, we can see how the use of sacred symbols in the work of Novalis might indeed be interpreted in the context of secularization. He can be read as using these figures to denote a telos, albeit a non-Christian one. However, to read

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

the sacred symbols as representing Enlightenment ideals still implies linear progression towards a goal. This obscures the way in which ‘sheer discontinuity’<sup>47</sup> is vital to the idea of temporality to be found in the texts of Romantic writers. The concept of radical discontinuity is central to Paul de Man’s famous essay, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, which examines the ways in which the symbol is linked to temporalization while allegory is the figure of temporality:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or an identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal distance.<sup>48</sup>

De Man has had a significant impact on our understanding of (mainly English) Romanticism and, by providing a new way of conceptualizing the Romantic text, his work has helped to uncover the radical temporality which is already its hallmark. So we need to look again at aspects of Novalis’s work that seems to invite readings governed by secularization and temporalization – in other words, in terms of forward, linear movement towards the ideal state – and examine the validity of Kuzniar’s and de Man’s very different interpretation.

Firstly, one cannot deny that we find in his work scattered references to the golden age, the millennium and the image of the poet as messiah. However, for those who see in Novalis ‘a substitute for or a translation of Christian salvation history [...] his secular transformations of sacred themes are decoded back into their original

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Paul De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality,’ in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 207.

language'.<sup>49</sup> Kuzniar's assertion that these critics are invariably advocates of secularization is strongly supported by her examination of older Novalis criticism, which in many cases focuses on the 'utopic elements' in his work.<sup>50</sup> While Novalis does use ciphers such as the 'golden age' to convey the idea of a perfect state, he demonstrates at the same time that this state is neither possible nor desirable. This corresponds to his reflections on the status of the necessary but fictional absolute.

According to Kuzniar, the ambiguity and the contradictory moments in Novalis's work merely give certain critics licence to impose transcendent values onto what are clearly fictive constructs.<sup>51</sup> She identifies two main ways in which critics have read Novalis's transformation of Christian salvation history. The first group maintains that 'poetry realizes or objectifies the messianic kingdom'.<sup>52</sup> The poet is the priest, and poetry is glorified, elevated to the status of a spiritual absolute and the final stage in the progression of humanity. The second group argues that Novalis merely '*anticipates* the culmination of salvation history',<sup>53</sup> his poetry portraying and thereby ensuring movement towards the 'absolute present'.<sup>54</sup> Johannes Mahr maintains: 'Dichtung beschreibt eine erwartete Wirklichkeit und sucht sie, [...], durch

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<sup>49</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Examples include Rudolf Meyer's Novalis, *Das Christus-Erlebnis und die neue Geistesoffenbarung* (1954), Hans-Joachim Mähl's *Die Idee des goldenen Zeitalters im Werk des Novalis* (1965) and Karl Grob's *Ursprung und Utopie* (1976). See *Delayed Endings*, p. 74, for further examples.

<sup>51</sup> See Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 76.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Kuzniar cites several examples of this kind of criticism. For instance, Martin Schmid says: 'Im poetischen *Machwerk* spricht sich die transzendente Welt aus' (p. 177). Martin E. Schmid, *Novalis: Dichter an der Grenze zum Absoluten* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1976), p. 177.

<sup>53</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 76.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Faber, 'Apokalyptische Mythologie: Zur Religionsdichtung des Novalis,' in *Romantische Utopie – Utopische Romantik*, ed. by Dischner and Faber (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1979), p. 21. Cited by Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 76.

die Beschreibung näherzubringen.’<sup>55</sup> While I do not want to insist too much on Kuzniar’s assertion that these critics are *wrong* to seek closure, her identification of these two ways of conceptualizing the transcendental reminds us that there is always more than one way of reading a text, and also of the importance of appreciating the paradoxical moments and apparent contradictions in early Romantic texts. The grafting of transcendental values onto fictive constructs provides an important clue to the critical desire for closure. While the theory of how the concept of secularization has influenced some readings of Novalis certainly goes a long way towards explaining this, there is another, more general attitude governing criticism which seeks closure in the texts of Novalis, or, indeed, in the texts of any writer. In the case of sacred symbols and ciphers such as the golden age, critics such as Mähl would like to regard these as standing unequivocally for an extra-textual idea, whether it be the notion of never-ending perfectibility or the ideal or absolute itself. Kuzniar herself recognizes this and refers to it simply as our ‘desire for referentiality’.<sup>56</sup> However, the phrase ‘desire for referentiality’ is slightly misleading. Kuzniar sidesteps the point that there *is always* referentiality and representation – these cannot be suppressed, even in the most abstract poetry or nonsense verse. It is, rather, the notion that language refers directly and simply to anterior forms of presence which Novalis and Derrida seek to complicate.

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<sup>55</sup> Johannes Mahr, *Übergang zum Endlichen: Der Weg des Dichters in Novalis’ “Heinrich von Ofterdingen”* (Munich: Fink, 1970), p. 249. Cited by Kuzniar in the notes to Chapter 2, *Delayed Endings*, p. 213.

<sup>56</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p.73.

## Mallarmé's 'Mimique'

In Chapter 2 we looked at Novalis's famous short text on the functioning of language, 'Monolog'. This fascinating piece calls into question the assumption that we control language and can simply use it as a tool to refer in a simple manner to 'things'. 'Monolog' embodies Romantic undecidability to the extent that the text is itself a paradox. This undecidability is itself a manifestation of nonclosure. (Later, taking Novalis's unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, as a case in point, we will see how his longer texts also resist attempts to impose critical or ideological closure precisely by subverting the notion that language refers directly to reality. We will thus begin to examine more closely the way in which nonclosure is related to the self-referentiality of literature.) 'Monolog', as well as being a perfect example of (Romantic) 'literature', or literature as the theory of itself, also subverts this belief in representation. Language cannot provide access to the true meaning or give us the experience or intuition of plenitude. However, in its very undecidability, 'Monolog' does not reject reference entirely.

In the second part of *La dissémination*, 'La double séance', Derrida is also concerned with showing how a text can undermine the idea of representation while, paradoxically, preserving its structure. We saw in the last chapter that, in 'La pharmacie de Platon', Derrida argues that philosophy's desire to efface the signifier has governed the inauguration of art as mimesis: art ought to try to reproduce, or represent, reality. In 'La double séance', he goes on to consider the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, a poet whose writing seems to Derrida to be at one end of the spectrum of



conceptions of the relation between truth and language throughout Western art and metaphysics. He suggests that a kind of history of truth can be seen as playing itself out *between* Plato and Mallarmé. And what is really at stake in this play is the relationship between *literature* and truth. Referring to the texts with which he has prefaced 'La double séance' (an extract from the *Philebus* juxtaposed with Mallarmé's prose poem 'Mimique'), he says that we can identify a series of motifs 'in a few rough strokes'. He continues:

Ces traits formeraient une sorte de cadre, la clôture, les bordures d'une histoire qui serait précisément celle d'un certain jeu entre littérature et vérité. L'histoire de ce rapport serait organisée [...] par une certaine interprétation de la mimesis. Une telle interprétation n'a pas été l'acte ou la décision spéculative d'un auteur à un moment donné mais, [...], le tout d'une histoire. Entre Platon et Mallarmé, [...] une histoire a eu lieu.<sup>57</sup>

Here is the complete text of 'Mimique':

Le silence, seul luxe après les rimes, un orchestre ne faisant avec son or, ses frôlements de pensée et de soir, qu'en détailler la signification à l'égal d'une ode tue et que c'est au poète, suscité par un défi, de traduire! le silence aux après-midi de musique; je le trouve, avec contentement, aussi, devant la réapparition toujours inédite de Pierrot ou du poignant ou élégant mime Paul Margueritte.

Ainsi ce PIERROT ASSASSIN DE SA FEMME composé et rédigé par lui-même, soliloque muet que, tout du long à son âme tient et du visage et des gestes le fantôme blanc comme une page pas encore écrite. Un tourbillon de raisons naïves ou neuves émane, qu'il plairait de saisir avec sûreté: l'esthétique du genre situé plus près de principes qu'aucun! rien en cette région du caprice ne contrariant l'instinct simplificateur direct ... Voici – “ La scène n'illustre que l'idée, pas une action effective, dans un hymen (d'où procède le Rêve), vicieux mais sacré, entre le désir et l'accomplissement, la perpétration et son souvenir: ici avançant, là remémorant, au futur, au passé, *sous une apparence fausse de présent*. Tel opère le Mime, dont le jeu se borne à une allusion perpétuelle sans briser la glace: il installe, ainsi, un

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 225.

milieu, pur, de fiction.” Moins qu’un millier de lignes, le rôle, qui le lit, tout de suite comprend les règles comme placé devant un tréteau, leur dépositaire humble. Surprise, accompagnant l’artifice d’une notation de sentiments par phrases point proférées – que, dans le seul case, peut-être, avec authenticité, entre les feuillets et le regard règne au silence encore, condition et délice de la lecture.<sup>58</sup>

The poem’s genesis is particularly complicated, being a sort of reader-response to a short booklet by Mallarmé’s friend Paul Margueritte, which is in turn the description of the performance of a mimodrama in the style of the *Comedia dell’arte*. Derrida spends some time discussing the complicated nature of the poem’s beginnings but, as he himself says, this is less important than the complexity of the text itself. Like Novalis’s ‘Monolog’, what ‘Mimique’ *does* is as relevant as what it seems to *say*. However, we do need to consider to a certain extent what Margueritte’s booklet is about. ‘Mimique’ itself actually directs us to the ‘booklet-object’ to which the prose poem is a response. The pamphlet describes ‘after the event’ the performance of Pierrot miming how he murders his wife by tickling her to death. That Margueritte wrote the booklet *after* the performance is significant for Derrida. No writing can be said to have preceded the mimodrama. ‘Mimique’ proclaims that the mime writes *himself* in a mute soliloquy, upon the white page that he is: ‘Ainsi ce PIERROT ASSASSIN DE SA FEMME composé et rédigé par lui-même, soliloque muet que, tout du long à son âme tient et du visage et des gestes le fantôme blanc comme une page pas encore écrite.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Mimique’ from the Pléiade edition of Mallarmé’s *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 310. Cited by Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 217. All further references to ‘Mimique’ will be to the Derrida text.

<sup>59</sup> See *La dissémination*, pp. 238-39.

What is also interesting about the mimodrama is, firstly, that it portrays a murder without weapon. A certain kind of (non-)event is mimed, but it is a murder in which the distinction between perpetrator and victim is blurred by the way in which Pierrot switches between miming himself killing his wife and miming her death by laughter. The boundary between perpetration and desire is blurred. As such the drama itself enacts a temporal confusion which Mallarmé in turn thematizes in ‘Mimique’. Derrida says:

Le crime a déjà eu lieu au moment où Pierrot le mime. Et il mime – ‘au présent’ –, ‘*sous une apparence fausse de présent*’, le crime accompli. Mais mimant au présent le passé, il reconstitue, dans ledit ‘présent’, la délibération qui a préparé le meurtre, lorsque s’interrogeant sur les moyens à employer, il avait encore affaire à un crime à venir, à une mort à donner.<sup>60</sup>

Yet what is represented is something which has never been anywhere present. Mallarmé begins the poem with the claim that Pierrot writes himself on the white page that he is. Nothing is prescribed to him, and certainly no prior writing or discourse. Derrida then draws our attention to another sentence, in quotation marks, in ‘Mimique’ which also thematizes this. (I cannot say ‘illustrates’ because ‘illustrates’ is precisely what the verb ‘illustre’ does *not* do.) “*La scène n’illustre que l’idée, pas une action effective ...*” Derrida points out that this is actually no quotation – for what is being cited? – but rather the simulacrum of a quotation. Derrida’s fascination with Mallarmé often comes from the way in which his poetry complicates the distinction between doing and saying. In the case of the simulated quotation something is ostensibly quoted which has never been said in an ‘original’

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<sup>60</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 246.

in the same way as the mime imitates on the stage nothing that has ever been present: 'Il n'y a pas d'imitation. Le Mime n'imité rien. Et d'abord il n'imité pas. Il n'y a rien avant l'écriture de ses gestes. Rien ne lui est prescrit. Aucun présent n'aura précédé ni surveillé le tracement de son écriture.'<sup>61</sup> And if anything could be said to precede or follow 'Mimique', it would be Margueritte's booklet and the reflection or referral would be between two texts, setting up an abyssal structure of mirroring. This would seem to be borne out by 'Mimique': 'Tel opère le Mime, dont le jeu se borne à une allusion perpétuelle sans briser la glace: il installe, ainsi, un milieu, pur, de fiction.' In this pure medium of fiction there is the reference of allusion but we cannot locate or describe the referent.

However, we should not be hasty in assuming that mimesis is thus neatly overturned or displaced by Margueritte and Mallarmé, or even by the play of reflections between their texts. Derrida warns that we are not dealing with a simple, straightforward rejection or reversal of mimesis. He points out that the poem could be seen as a kind of 'neo-idealism' in which the Idea is presented, an intuition of the *eidos* itself. He concedes that this is one possible reading, but goes on to suggest that such a reading would miss the way 'Mimique' pays attention to the writing itself, to writing's self-referentiality, both in the configuration of texts which surround it and in the actual text. Just as Novalis's 'Monolog' allows for the possibility of a certain commerce between the world (or the truth) and language, so, too, does Derrida remind us that a simple 'reversal of mimetologism', an attempt to jump out of it 'using both feet' would return us to the domain of the thing itself or the idea itself:

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

À vouloir renverser le mimétologisme ou à prétendre lui échapper d'un coup, en sautant simplement à *pieds joints*, on retombe sûrement et immédiatement dans son système: on supprime le double ou on dialectise et on retrouve la perception de la chose même, la production de sa présence, sa vérité, comme idée, forme ou matière.<sup>62</sup>

What Derrida finds important in the referentiality of the mimodrama, and by extension Mallarmé's critique of it, is that there *is* reference beyond a neat self-mirroring. Firstly, because even writing which seems only to refer to itself always already refers to some other writing. This is an essential necessity of writing, not least because each and every word is marked by, or bears the trace of, all the words it *is not* in the web of differential relations. But even more interesting is the way in which *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* and 'Mimique' preserve the *structure* of reference, but of a reference without referent. Thus we can re-read the sentence 'sans briser la glace' as thematizing the double that has no simple, reference without referent, the re-presentation of nothing that has ever been present. Looking at the first part of the simulated quotation, Derrida draws attention to the word 'hymen'. This word operates for Derrida in a way which is related to supplementarity, but it is its relation to undecidability which is more important here. And we must allow for a certain awareness in 'Mimique' which is lacking in Rousseau, to the extent that the dangerous supplement seems to interrupt or disturb his text contrary to his intention. Unlike Rousseau, Mallarmé delights in the signature, marking and re-marking the textuality or literariness of the text. The hymen means both the marriage or joining of different, and is also the membrane which stands between the desire to penetrate and its fulfilment. In 'Mimique' and 'Pierrot' the hymen is the murder without crime

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

and the mirror of a reference without referent, but this reference *at the same time* – in the vibratory undecidability of the hymen – alludes but without breaking the mirror; reflecting itself but *not only itself*.

### **‘Zufall’: Aphorism and the Accidental**

The thematics of the glass will occupy us for the rest of this chapter and we will return to mirrors in the next chapter on the death of the other. ‘La glace’ will help to conceptualize further nonclosure and self-referentiality in the texts of Derrida and Novalis. The mirror, for example, is not transparent. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, to which we will return later in the chapter, and the fairy tales embedded in the work, are perfect illustrations of Novalis’s theory that a good *Märchen* is not an exercise in the transparent conveying of a meaning or message. One of his aphorisms says:

Erzählungen, ohne Zusammenhang, jedoch mit Association, wie *Träume* ... aber auch ohne alle Sinn und Zusammenhang – höchstens einzelne Strofen verständlich – sie müssen, wie lauter Bruchstücke aus den verschiedenartigsten Dingen [seyen].<sup>63</sup>

The mention of the ‘Unverständlichkeit’ of all but a few verses is reminiscent of Derrida’s repeated assertions that no context is ever fully saturated; no statement is ever transparent to itself.<sup>64</sup> Klingsohr’s tale at the end of the first part of the novel, in particular, exemplifies the association of ideas ‘ohne alle Sinn und Zusammenhang’.

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<sup>63</sup> N III, p. 572, ‘Fragmente und Studien 1799/1800’, no. 113.

<sup>64</sup> In *Mémoires*, for instance, Derrida says: ‘tout dépend de contextes toujours ouverts, non saturables, qu’un mot seul (par exemple dans un titre) commence à avoir le sens de toutes les phrases potentielles dans lesquelles on l’inscrira [...]’ *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, p. 116.

Mixing elements from Greek and Nordic mythology, as well as reprising various themes from the preceding narrative, it has invited reams of speculative criticism, but the tale, throughout which meanings continually circulate and dissipate, ultimately resists definitive explication. Furthermore, the open-ended referrals and echoes are not governed by a particular order – if they are governed by anything we might describe this as ‘Zufall’ or ‘chance’. Novalis recognizes the arbitrary, ultimately ungovernable, nature of poetic reference:

Der Poët braucht die Dinge und Worte, wie *Tasten* und die ganze Poesie beruht auf thätiger Idéennassociation – auf selbstthätiger, absichtlicher, idealischer *Zufallproduktion* (zufällige – freye *Catenation*). [...] (*Spiel*).<sup>65</sup>

And Derrida demonstrates the strange interrelation between chance and aphorism.

Relating his own series of aphorisms to the way in which the fate of Romeo and Juliet is structured by a kind of aphoristic dissociation, he states:

9. L’aphorisme ou le discours de la dissociation: chaque phrase, chaque paragraphe se voue à la séparation, il s’enferme, qu’on le veuille ou non, dans la solitude de sa durée propre. Sa rencontre et son contact avec l’autre se livrent toujours à la chance, à ce qui tombe, bien ou mal. Rien n’est absolument assuré, ni l’enchaînement, ni l’ordre. Un aphorisme de la série peut arriver avant ou après l’autre, avant *et* après l’autre, chacun peut survivre à l’autre – et dans l’autre série.<sup>66</sup>

This aphoristic dissociation is the structure of life – also of the fragmentary series and poetic production – to the extent that nothing is absolutely assured. The notion of ‘chance’ or ‘accident’ (unfortunate or otherwise) is questioned and complicated by

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<sup>65</sup> N III, p. 451, ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 953.

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 520.



the logic of supplementarity and we find that it is actually an *essential* structure. If things go wrong, this is not an unlucky accident, a twist to what should have gone right. Just as non-serious utterances are what make serious utterances possible, 'things going right' is just another version of 'things going wrong'.

### **'Au commencement il y eut le contretemps'**

Derrida's above comments on the order of the aphoristic series naturally raise once more the question of origins and ends: where do we start and where do we end (up)? Having started to think about *nonclosure*, we now need to return to the idea of beginnings which we looked at in the previous chapters. As far as the fragmentary series is concerned, since the association of ideas and the reference of one aphorism to another work in various directions, one can never determine an absolute starting-point. The impossibility of identifying an originary idea or moment is mirrored in the structure of self-consciousness, and such an origin is *always already* inaccessible to both cognition and language. For Novalis, as for Derrida, the idea of an origin or a beginning is every bit as problematic as that of an ending. His 'Fichte-Studien' make it clear that in self-consciousness no reflection can be said to be originary:

[E]ine Mittelanschauung [muß] hervorgehen, welche selbst wieder durch ein hervorgehendes Gefühl und eine vorhergehende Reflexion, die aber nicht ins Bewußtseyn kommen kann, hervorgebracht wird.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> N II, p. 115, no. 17.

Attempting to identify an absolute starting point, the *first* moment, merely leads to the discovery of what Kuzniar calls ‘an unending string of antecedent moments’.<sup>68</sup>

Novalis also says that an origin is actually ‘*ein 2er Moment*’<sup>69</sup> and that:

Alle Wirckung ist verkehrt etc. Jede Ursach erweckt Ursachen – die *Caussa prima* ist nur das erste Glied der ursächlichen Reihe – diese Reihe ist aber vorwärts und rückwärts unendlich. Nur unter Voraussetzungen und willkührlichen Annahmen oder Datis giebt’s eine *Caussa prima* – nicht absolut.<sup>70</sup>

The idea that the chain of ideas extends infinitely in two directions is very important here. Attempts to locate the originary moment will be sabotaged by the never-ending chain of ideas. So, just as Novalis postpones or defers the telos, as we have seen in the chapter on self-consciousness, the moment of origin, too, is equated with difference (but *not* with pure absence). Kuzniar refers to Novalis as ‘writing in the interim’ and this is a useful way of describing the processes of self-consciousness and those of philosophy and poetry while de-emphasising their terminal points. And she underlines the fact that ‘these points can in turn be dislocated, so that any moment in the interim can designate another relative or arbitrary beginning’.<sup>71</sup> Beginnings are just like endings – both share the same difficulties and the same structure. As we have seen, the problem of beginnings and the impossibility of locating origins is one of Derrida’s most frequent themes. Language cannot be held to represent fully or to refer directly to extralinguistic ‘ideas’ or ‘realities’ – even future or past ones. Instead, we have this (by now familiar) double movement where

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<sup>68</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 84.

<sup>69</sup> N II, p. 591, ‘Vorarbeiten 1798: Anekdoten’, no. 284.

<sup>70</sup> N III, p. 376 ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 615.

<sup>71</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, pp. 85-86.

the notion of origins and endings is both courted *and* undermined. Whether in the guise of an aphorism, or an aphoristic series, or whether they manifest themselves through the various means of deferring closure in longer texts, fragmentariness and nonclosure serve as reminders that language is self-referential – but they also remind us that meaning and the other are always ‘there’, in the in-between, hiding behind the signifiers which seem to reveal them but, at the same time, guard them jealously.

I would now like to consider Novalis’s novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, as an exercise in self-referentiality. This will help to elucidate the relation between self-referentiality and nonclosure. In order to appreciate the similarity in the techniques through which both Derrida and Novalis circumvent closure, I will juxtapose my reading of *Ofterdingen* with Derrida’s reading of the Kafka short story ‘Vor dem Gesetz’ (‘Before the Law’). Though only a fraction of the length of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Kafka’s text thematizes the role which language plays in constructing what are often regarded as extra-textual ideas or things. Novalis’s novel is the story of the life’s journey and artistic development of a young poet and the Kafka text is concerned with that most inaccessible of absolutes, the Law. Reading these texts together, I hope to show how the re-marking of *différance* through nonclosure is intimately related to self-referentiality.

## ‘Devant la loi’

‘Devant la loi’ is Derrida’s detailed reading of the Kafka short story ‘Vor dem Gesetz’.<sup>72</sup> Kafka’s text illustrates nonclosure in very economical fashion. It relates the arrival before the Law of a man from the country. Upon demanding admittance to the Law, he is informed by the doorkeeper that access is possible but ‘not at the moment’:

Devant la loi se dresse le gardien de la porte. Un homme de la campagne se présente et demande à entrer dans la loi. Mais le gardien dit que pour l’instant il ne peut pas lui accorder l’entrée. L’homme réfléchit, puis demande s’il lui sera permis d’entrer plus tard. “C’est possible”, dit le gardien, “mais pas maintenant.”<sup>73</sup>

The man remains there for many years, repeatedly begging admittance only to be met with the same reply. He focuses all his attention on the doorkeeper, forgetting that beyond this one are more doorkeepers, each more ‘powerful’ than the last. Finally, he dies, without having gained what he sought and the doorkeeper’s last words to him – and they are also the last words of the text – are: ‘Ici, nul autre que toi ne pouvait pénétrer, car cette entrée n’était faite que pour toi. Maintenant, je m’en vais et je ferme la porte.’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> I am going to quote from the French translation of the Kafka text (by Alexandre Vialatte et Marthe Robert) which appears in Derrida’s text. This is because the relationship of framing – the fact that both Derrida’s and Kafka’s texts share the same (which, as we know is not synonymous with *identical*) title, and the fact that the title and the first line of Kafka’s story are the same – is one of the themes of Derrida’s reading. Page references are to the Derrida text: ‘Préjugés: Devant la loi’, in J. Derrida, V. Descombes et al., *La faculté de juger* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985). Hereafter ‘Devant la loi’.

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, ‘Devant la loi’, p. 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

Derrida's reading is in many ways an expression of his admiration for the parable which is extremely concise in its demonstration that any transcendental value, whether it be the law or the ultimate meaning of a text, is subject to precisely the same structure. The beauty of the Kafka text lies in the fact that: 'Il dit et produit en son acte même la loi qui le protège et le rend intangible. Il fait et il dit, il dit ce qu'il fait en faisant ce qu'il dit.'<sup>75</sup> Just as the countryman naively expects that he may gain access to the Law, stand in the full presence of the Law, so might the reader believe in the possibility of accessing the proper meaning of the text. The impossibility of entering into the Law as Absolute *and* the impossibility of accessing the ultimate meaning of a text (the transcendental signified) are 're-marked' in the story, quite literally by the *letter* of the law, the letter of the text. They are essences without essence. As Kafka's countryman learns, the door was made only for him – the law is not a universal generality but is itself an idiom, a kind of narrative:

Elle est l'interdit: cela ne signifie pas qu'elle interdit mais qu'elle est elle-même interdite, un lieu interdit. Elle s'interdit et se contredit en mettant l'homme dans sa propre contradiction: on ne peut arriver jusqu'à elle et pour avoir *rapport* avec elle selon le respect, *il faut ne pas, il ne faut pas* avoir rapport à elle, *il faut interrompre la relation*. Il faut n'*entrer en relation* qu'avec ses représentants, ses exemples, ses gardiens. Et ce sont des interrupteurs autant que des messagers.<sup>76</sup>

The doorman, as a representative of the law, pronounces the law but also prevents access to it. In the same way, the meaning of a text seems to be revealed through its words. Yet we can never directly access the meaning since the relation is interrupted. The words not only function as messengers of meaning but also withhold and delay

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

meaning even as they generate it. We need to emphasize that, in both instances, what is desired – to be in the full presence of the law, or of the meaning – is impossible because both are essences without essence. Of the law (and, of course, simultaneously of the text) Derrida says:

par-delà un regard, par-delà l'étant (la loi n'est rien qui soit présent), la loi appelle en silence. Avant même la conscience morale en tant que telle, elle oblige à répondre, elle destine à la responsabilité et à la garde. Elle met en mouvement et le gardien et l'homme, ce couple singulier, les attirant vers elle et les arrêtant devant elle. Elle détermine l'être-pour-la mort devant elle. Encore un infime déplacement et le gardien de la loi (*Hüter*) ressemblerait au berger de l'être (*Hirt*). Je crois à la nécessité de ce 'rapprochement', comme on dit, mais sous la proximité, sous la métonymie peut-être (la loi, un autre nom pour l'être, l'être un autre nom pour la loi; dans les deux cas, le 'transcendant', comme dit Heidegger de l'être) se cache et se garde peut-être encore l'abîme d'une différence.<sup>77</sup>

Instead of the *présence* of Being, or truth, or meaning, or law – though we cannot do without them and must answer their call – there is difference, and *différance*.

This exemplary performative text, 'Vor dem Gesetz', says what it does by doing what it says. But lest we see this as the perfect specular reflection, we realize that this by no means gives rise to a complete and closed account of the text. Jonathan Culler incisively expresses deconstruction's perspective on self-reflexive writing, stressing at the same time the way in which the paradoxical structure blocks the text's transparency to itself:

[...] the relation deconstruction reveals is not the transparency of the text to itself in an act of reflexive self-description or self-possession; it is rather an

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 123-24.

uncanny neatness that generates paradox, a self-reference that ultimately brings out the inability of any discourse to account for itself and the failure of performative and constative or doing and being to coincide.<sup>78</sup>

Culler mentions other instances of self-reflection from the domain of mathematics and logic which generate paradoxes. One point, and this will be familiar from Chapter 1, is that any meta-textual commentary on the text *within the text* cannot comment on itself while commenting on the text because for the whole text to be truly self-reflexive the meta-textual commentary plus the text would require meta-meta-textual commentary and so on. This textual self-referentiality recalls the self-reflection of the subject in the attainment of consciousness. The aporia – the never-ending oscillation or ‘Rollentausch’ – described by Novalis functions in precisely the same way as the self-reflexivity of the text. In the activity of the ego, Being and reflection never coincide and, like the meaning of the text, the Being of the ego is not simply *anywhere*; it is neither here nor there and if it can be said to *be* anywhere then it is in-between. Like de Man and Schulte-Sasse, Culler links textual self-referentiality with the attainment of self-consciousness, describing them as ‘versions’ of one another:

The notion of a text accounting for itself is another version of self-presence, another avatar of the system of *s'entendre parler*. Texts work in self-referential ways to provide concepts that are strategically important in reading them, but there is always, Derrida would say, a lag or a limp. ‘Ça boîte et ça ferme mal.’ Boxing itself in, a text does not produce closure.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 201.

<sup>79</sup> Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 205. Culler cites Derrida, *La carte postale*, p. 418.



The Kafka text, Derrida tells us, would be the door. The doorman's final words, 'I am now going to shut it', are, Derrida tells us, the conclusion or closure of the story. But in closing upon nothing closure becomes nonclosure:

En fermant la chose, il [le gardien; the doorman] aura fermé le texte. Qui pourtant ne ferme sur rien. Le récit 'Devant la loi' ne raconterait ou ne décrirait que lui-même en tant que texte. Il ne ferait que cela ou ferait aussi cela. Non pas dans une réflexion spéculaire assurée de quelque transparence sui-référentielle, et j'insiste sur ce point, mais dans l'illisibilité du texte, si l'on veut bien entendre par là l'impossibilité où nous sommes aussi d'accéder à son propre sens, au contenu peut-être inconsistant qu'il garde jalousement en réserve. Le texte se garde, comme la loi. Il ne parle que de lui-même, mais alors de sa non-identité à soi. Il n'arrive ni ne laisse arriver à lui-même. Il est la loi, fait la loi et laisse le lecteur devant la loi.<sup>80</sup>

The contretemps inherent in the idea of 'non-identity-with-itself' is simply another name for the *différance* which is re-marked by the strategies of nonclosure:

Différance jusqu'à la mort, pour la mort, sans fin parce que finie. Représenté par le gardien, le discours de la loi ne dit pas 'non' mais 'pas encore', indéfiniment. D'où l'engagement dans un récit à la fois parfaitement fini et brutalement interrompu, on pourrait dire primitivement interrompu.<sup>81</sup>

Derrida takes up again and again the theme of the literary text's non-identity with itself. A text – any text – is never identical with itself. He begins the reading of 'Vor dem Gesetz' by musing on the two versions of Kafka's story, one as a self-contained story and the other as a story related in the novel, *Der Prozess*. These two versions of the same tale serve to remind us that, as Borges's Pierre Menard discovered, even if it is replicated *to the letter*, the text is immediately changed by context. But, as so

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<sup>80</sup> Derrida, 'Devant la loi', p. 128.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

often with Derrida, this actually points to a more general non-identity of writing with itself. No text could ever be identical with itself since language is not identical with itself. The meaning which is generated and withheld by the words of a text is, like self-consciousness and our relation to the other, subject to the ceaseless movement of time with all the problems of the 'present' we have already encountered. However, though no text could be said to be identical with itself, some texts more than others seek to thematize this, to play with it. These texts are, in a sense, more *honest* and more aware of the elusive nature of anything to which metaphysics or common-sense would like to give the qualities of an absolute and unchanging *présence* or the plenitude of a harmonious self-possession. To put it in Ponge's terms, these texts sign *properly*, through a certain frankness and the re-marking of their own textuality. Hardenberg's novel certainly belongs to the texts which make a theme of the non-identity of writing with itself. We will now look to the ways in which, as Alice Kuzniar puts it, Novalis's narrative 'never *is* that which it describes'.<sup>82</sup>

### ***Heinrich von Ofterdingen*: Narrative Nonclosure**

Because of its unfinished status, Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* cannot strictly be said to be, like 'Vor dem Gesetz', 'without end because ended' ('sans fin parce que finie'.<sup>83</sup>) However, as I said above, the question of whether or not Novalis planned to finish the novel, even though it has occupied critics for many years, is less

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<sup>82</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 110.

<sup>83</sup> Derrida, 'Devant la loi', p. 122.

relevant than its intrinsic fragmentariness. The novel embodies nonclosure in the same kind of undecidability we have seen in 'Vor dem Gesetz'. Of course, as Derrida reminds us, this essential undecidability is a possibility of any text, even if it does not take as obviously a self-referential form as in this case.<sup>84</sup> *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is self-referential but by no means as neatly as the Kafka story. However, we shall see how, as well as residing in the various formal methods of circumventing closure outlined in Novalis's fragments, nonclosure is directly related to the way in which the novel 'exceeds' itself by continually referring to its own status as literature. What Derrida says of 'Vor dem Gesetz', also applies to *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*: 'Il désigne aussi obliquement la littérature, il parle de lui-même comme d'un effet littéraire. Par où il déborde la littérature dont il parle.'<sup>85</sup>

As we saw above, both Novalis and Derrida are aware that beginnings and endings are of the same order. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* begins medias in res with the protagonist lying awake in bed, pondering the significance of the mysterious Blue Flower:

Die Eltern lagen schon und schliefen, die Wanduhr schlug ihren einförmigen Takt, vor den klappernden Fenstern sauste der Wind; abwechselnd wurde die Stube hell von dem Schimmer des Mondes. Der Jüngling lag unruhig auf seinem Lager, und gedachte des Fremden und seiner Erzählungen. 'Nicht die Schätze sind es, die ein so unaussprechliches Verlangen in mir geweckt haben,' sagte er zu sich selbst; 'fern ab liegt mir alle Habsucht: aber die blaue Blume sehn' ich mich zu erblicken. Sie liegt mir unaufhörlich im Sinn, und ich kann nichts anderes dichten und denken.'<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 129: 'Cette possibilité est impliquée en tout texte, même quand il n'a pas la forme évidemment sui-référentielle de celui-ci.'

<sup>85</sup> Derrida, 'Devant la loi', p. 133.

<sup>86</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 195.

This cipher of 'die blaue Blume', the meaning of which is endlessly displaced and deferred, occurs again and again throughout the novel. But, though Heinrich is puzzled by the significance of the flower and the strange new feelings it has awakened in him, he himself is not the source of the idea of the Blue Flower. We learn that he has heard the idea from a mysterious stranger some time before. And later we discover that Heinrich's father dreamt in his youth of a beautiful flower. Already any attempt to locate the source of the symbol or to discover an initial event has been thwarted. As Mallarmé's Pierrot mimes a non-event, we see that what is being related here is also a non-event – that which sets the entire novel in motion is itself a narrative. It is not originary but second-hand and derivative, located (if a non-event can be said to *be* anywhere) in someone else's dream or in the tales of a stranger. At this point in the novel, Heinrich is unable to articulate the feelings inspired by the flower: 'Es muß noch viele Worte geben, die ich nicht weiß: wüßte ich mehr, so könnte ich viel besser alles begreifen.'<sup>87</sup> Novalis's formulation is interesting because it turns referentiality upside down by suggesting that words are more than a secondary vehicle for conveying or communicating some anterior mental activity. Heinrich puts words in the primary position: words facilitate, even *create*, understanding. Alice Kuzniar draws attention to Heinrich's observation that he seems to lack words *at the moment*. This suggests that the apparent promise of clarification is being held back, perhaps deferred to a later part of the novel. Indeed, Heinrich's father predicts that some kind of revelation will occur on the feast of St John. Yet the second chapter commences with the cursory narratorial observation that St John's day has come and gone. No further mention of revelation is made – the dream itself

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

is not even referred to at this point. As Kuzniar puts it: ‘The lack of a sufficient interpretation propels the story forward, and the subsequent chapters carry with them the hope for resolution and *Erfüllung*.’<sup>88</sup>

That night Heinrich dreams of the Blue Flower. Kuzniar’s commentary on this dream sequence is extremely insightful. She points out that the narrative moment at which the dream begins is uncertain. The narrator, whom we assume at first to be omniscient, begins to question whether Heinrich is aware that he is dreaming. The phrase ‘es war ihm, als ob...’ recurs throughout the narration of the dream. Kuzniar says:

The effect on the reader is uncanny and estranging. Do people ever dream in the subjunctive? Does Heinrich indeed dream what he is narrated to be dreaming? The episode alerts the reader to its consciously fictive irreality.<sup>89</sup>

Kuzniar sees the dream as inaugurating a search for origins. This recalls (or, strictly speaking, *anticipates*, but this is all part of the text’s temporal confusion) the famous question articulated in the second part of the novel: ‘Wo gehn wir denn hin?’<sup>90</sup> The answer is ‘Immer nach Hause’<sup>91</sup> and, as we shall see, the fruitless search for origins – which are of the same order as endings – is thematized throughout the novel in both content and structure. In this first dream, Heinrich enters a cave in which there is a pool and fountain. After bathing in the pool, an almost baptismal rite, he swims further along a stream into the mountain. At this point, he has another dream within

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<sup>88</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 108.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>90</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 325.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

the first: 'Eine Art von süßem Schlummer befiel ihn.'<sup>92</sup> Awakening from this slumber, he finds himself next to another fountain *beside* (not in the *centre* of) which he sees a light-blue flower the petals of which surround the face of a girl. The successive encapsulations – dream within dream within an overarching narrative – underline the 'consciously fictive irreality' of the whole. And the way in which Heinrich moves from one enclosure to the next in his dream landscape mirrors the novel's structure of abyssal enclosures, caves within caves reflecting dreams within dreams and tales within tales. However, what we have here is in no way a structure of concentric circles in the *centre* of which meaning could be located. As Kuzniar says:

This process of encapsulation marks an effort to draw closer to the center or origin of these manifold concentric circles. At each successive encapsulation, the contained becomes the container, the unveiled the veiled, and the inner the outer; the concentric shows itself to be excentric. Thus the successive enclosings turn out to be a series of reversals instead. In the course of the linear narrative, they appear as displacements of one another. This movement carries on indefinitely because the center cannot be found.<sup>93</sup>

### **Tales within Tales: 'Arion-Sage', 'Atlantis-Märchen' and Klingsohr's tale**

As with the dream, the inlaid fairytales pose problems of structural relation to the wider narrative. But we also need to look at the fact that, taken one at a time, as self-contained tales, the *Märchen* are self-referential in that their themes concern poetry and the attainment of poetic maturity. The first two tales are related to Heinrich and

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>93</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 107.

his mother by the merchants who are their travelling companions. The first tale, the 'Arion-Sage', is a simple story, circular in structure, in which the power of poetry brings about the return of lost treasure to the poet. Of course, we must consider the stories in relation to the narrative in which they are embedded and here, too, we sense that the 'Arion' tale reflects the novel's apparent movement towards a new golden age, to be ushered in through the power of poetry. But we would be mistaken to view the tale's happy ending as a kind of closure or even as a prefiguration of the ultimate closure of the novel. The ending is relativized in several ways. Firstly, it is relativized through the highly conscious fictionality of the story – this is not merely a tale but a tale within a tale. Then there is the fact that it is set in the distant past and relates a mystical, 'unrealistic' sequence of events. Most importantly, the return from fairy-tale to the narrative takes the form of an abrupt caesura. The action of the novel breaks in suddenly and, without comment on the Arion tale or its possible significance, the merchants start to tell a new one.

As in the 'Arion-Sage', this second story tells of the magical power of verse which restores happiness and order to a kingdom which had suffered from its lack of respect for poetry. Even more consciously self-referential than the first, the 'Atlantis-Märchen' ends with a poem composed by the poet-hero which is a re-telling of the entire tale. Here, too, the perfect ending is relativized as we learn that the action of the story has been played out in the mythical realm of Atlantis, and the tale ends with the revelation that Atlantis can no longer be found in the world, but only in myths: 'Kein Mensch weiß, wo das Land hingekommen ist. Nur in Sagen, heißt es, daß



Atlantis von mächtigen Fluten den Augen entzogen worden sei.’<sup>94</sup> And the narrative continues immediately, once again without pause for commentary or reflection. The tale ends the third chapter and the fourth begins with the information that Heinrich and his companions have been travelling for several days ‘ohne die mindeste Unterbrechung’. Kuzniar points out that, in view of the abrupt break in continuity between chapters three and four, this reads almost ironically.<sup>95</sup>

The third and longest tale, told by the poet Klingsohr, ends the first part of the novel, ‘Die Erwartung’. It, too, is self-reflexive, and is a more complex, allegorical, reformulation of the first two tales and, indeed, of the novel as a whole. Klingsohr’s tale also shares the triadic structure of the first tales. An initial state of harmony is disrupted through the breaking of a taboo. Fabel, the child heroine who represents poetry, takes on the task of restoring order and succeeds through her spinning of tales. Critics have tended to regard the tale as a self-contained unit and have focused on the utopic elements, primarily on the way in which resolution is once again effected by the power of poetry. However, to read the tale as representing the straightforward triumph of poetry over reason – reason is personified by the evil ‘Schreiber’ – is to ignore its inherent self-reflexivity and its relation to the overarching narrative. As in the dreams and earlier narratives, self-reflexivity (and hence nonclosure) is achieved by the successive and encapsulated episodes of which the story consists. Towards the end of the tale, in the court of the moon, a world within a world, a theatrical representation of the story takes place. The reference is oblique, as

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<sup>94</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 229.

<sup>95</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p.111.

Kuzniar says, 'suggestively traced'.<sup>96</sup> At the beginning of the tale, the song of a beautiful bird forecasts the outcome:

Wenn Fabel erst das alte Recht gewinnt,  
In Freya's Schooß wird sich die Welt entzünden  
Und jede Sehnsucht ihre Sehnsucht finden.<sup>97</sup>

The idea that longings will not be fulfilled already starts to subvert the notion of the 'happy ending' and helps prevent closure. Later on, Fabel sings a song, foretelling the harmonious end of the story. But, paradoxically, by pre-empting the ending in this way, 'Novalis weakens the teleological movement of the tale. A repetitive structure is grafted onto a teleological one. Fabel's song, while predicting, both repeats and substitutes for the entire action.'<sup>98</sup> The tale's introductory frame is also very important. Klingsohr prefaces his story by telling Heinrich that poetry is a difficult task, one to which the novice poet is rarely equal. He says that this particular tale was composed in his youth and bears the marks of his immaturity. Kuzniar remarks: 'Supposedly, though we hear no further critique of the Fabel *Märchen*, Klingsohr has written better poetry, which the reader then never witnesses. Also implied is that a future narration, presumably Heinrich's, will surpass Klingsohr's abstract, allegorical tale, a product of the latter's inexperienced youth.'<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.113.

<sup>97</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 292.

<sup>98</sup> Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 113.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

The end of the first part of the novel is indeed ‘intentionally incomplete, anticipatory, or future oriented’,<sup>100</sup> and nonclosure is most apparent in the framing of tales:

cast in the narrative framework, the tales either substitute for an intended eschatological utopia or tell us that this end state can only be repeatedly approximated or circumscribed in poetical fictions. There never comes a point where the frame and the tales coincide in what they describe. The narrative always reminds its reader that it is a vehicle of radical temporality.<sup>101</sup>

### En-closure: The Play of Framing

In ‘Devant la loi’ Derrida discusses the self-referentiality of Kafka’s short story and its status as literature, which also has to do with the play of framing:

Si nous soustrayons de ce texte tous les éléments qui pourraient appartenir à un autre registre (information quotidienne, histoire, savoir, philosophie, fiction, etc., bref, tout ce qui n’est pas nécessairement affilié à la littérature), nous sentons obscurément que ce qui *opère* et *fait oeuvre* dans ce texte garde un rapport essentiel avec le jeu du cadrage et la logique paradoxale des limites qui introduit une sorte de perturbation dans le système ‘normal’ de la référence, tout en *révélant* une structure essentielle de la référentialité. Révélation obscure de la référentialité qui ne fait pas plus référence, ne réfère pas plus que l’événeementialité de l’événement n’est un événement.<sup>102</sup>

And, as we have seen in our consideration of the dreams and inlaid fairy-tales, the play of framing constitutes the self-referentiality of Hardenberg’s novel. It is the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>102</sup> Derrida, ‘Devant la loi’, p. 131.

various plays of framing in both texts which 'introduce a perturbation in the "normal" system of reference'. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the circumvention of closure is most apparent, as Kuzniar says, in the interstices between episodes. Thus the tales are certainly self-referential but this only partially constitutes the novel's nonclosure. Nonclosure is also achieved through the way in which all three of the tales reprise or pre-empt the wider narrative. However, where the nonclosure of 'Vor dem Gesetz' is achieved through the unreadability of a breathtakingly economical and paradoxical self-referentiality, Novalis's novel embodies nonclosure by virtue of an extremely complex structure of opaque referentiality in which multiple narratives interact in a series of reversals, enclose and are enclosed, frame and become framed, in an open-ended yet circuitous process of deferral. Closure becomes nonclosure and *différance* is re-marked.

On his journey, the end of which may well turn out to have been its beginning, Heinrich chances upon a hermit. In the hermit's cave, he finds a manuscript in the Provençal language which tells of a medieval poet. The pictures seem to resemble Heinrich and portray his life and journey. The self-referentiality resides in the idea of the book within the book, reminding us that Heinrich's life is itself a narrative. But also thematized here is the way in which language or symbolic representations are not simply superadded to reality: the mysterious book suggests that 'reality' is also affected and infected by the complex relation of supplementarity which Derrida has described so well. As in 'Vor dem Gesetz', the self-referentiality is not transparent and specular but oblique and undeterminable. It suggests the way in which the general text or context, the 'out-work' ('hors-texte'), which constitutes

the world, is marked by the traces of signs and substitutions in the same way as language. We will see in the following chapter that, if language is essentially aphoristic, structured by separation, so too are the workings of love and desire. Furthermore, since the manuscript lacks both a beginning *and* an end, we are prevented from seeking clues to Heinrich's origins and any desire to see the script as somehow programming or prescribing his development is thwarted. Closure is infinitely postponed – in the inscrutable self-referentiality there is *différance* until death.

Throughout this chapter, I have often had recourse to Derrida's 'L'aphorisme à contretemps' because, in that it embodies the theory of literature in poetic form, in the best tradition of German Romanticism, it can be regarded as literature as the theory of itself – in this case, a series of aphorisms revealing the wider significance of aphorism. The other texts we have considered here, 'Vor dem Gesetz', 'Devant la loi' and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, also thematize and make explicit the way in which meaning is an essence without essence, only to be glimpsed and then lost *immediately* in the messengers and interruptors of language. Nonclosure is a way of describing the thematization of the interruption of meaning and the aphoristic structure of all language, and all texts. The functioning of language and the textuality of the texts are constantly highlighted. These are re-marked through the various ways in which the four texts perturb the 'normal' system of reference, their never-ending self-referentiality reminding us that *all* texts are subject to contretemps and *différance*. But all four texts remind us, too, that we cannot avoid entrusting the secret to letters. The aphoristic non-identity of the text with itself ensures that the gap

between word and meaning is never closed. This is what keeps alive the desire to read and to write: 'le désir ne s'expose pas à l'aphorisme par hasard. Il n'y a pas de temps pour le désir sans l'aphorisme. Le désir n'a pas lieu sans l'aphorisme.'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 521.

## Chapter 4

### The Death of the Other

**'Tout reste "en moi" ou "en nous", "entre nous" à la mort de l'autre.'**<sup>1</sup>

Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*

**'Soll ich getrennt seyn ewig? – ist Vorgefühl  
Der künftigen Vereinigung, dessen, was  
Wir hier für Unser schon erkannten,  
Aber nicht ganz noch besitzen konnten –'**<sup>2</sup>

Novalis, 'Anfang'

### Feminism and Romanticism

In 'L'aphorisme à contretemps', Derrida demonstrates that desire cannot find its breathing space without an aphoristic separation. Paradoxically, the desire to read, to know the secret which has been entrusted to letters, is only produced by the separation and *différance* of writing, and yet these are the very things which prevent its fulfilment. As Derrida says in *Donner la mort*: 'Le lecteur sent venir la littérature par la voie secrète de ce secret, un secret à la fois gardé et exposé, jalousement scellé et ouvert comme une lettre volée.'<sup>3</sup> However, 'L'aphorisme à contretemps' does not explore only this *textual* desire. At the same time, through the tragic story of Romeo

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Novalis, 'Anfang', *Schriften*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960-88), vol. I, p. 386. Hereafter N I, N II, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), p. 175. Derrida is fascinated by Poe's 'purloined letter', which is hidden and not hidden at the same time, remaining secret and concealed even as it sits in full view.



and Juliet, the text suggests that a similar paradox structures the way we relate to other subjects, other people.

In the literature of the *Frühromantiker*, notions of intersubjectivity and reflections on human relationships are often articulated through one of the most enduring images of Romanticism: that of the male poet/philosopher and his (preferably dead) female muse. Indeed, a large arena hosting the debate on the modernity of Romanticism has been feminist criticism. In many ways, the position with regard to women adopted by male members of the Jena circle, especially Novalis and the Schlegel brothers, can rightly be regarded as revolutionary for its time. During an era which saw a proliferation of treatises concerning gender difference,<sup>4</sup> the early Romantics stand out for their promotion of women as writers and philosophers, and also for their attempts to move beyond the binary oppositions of Enlightenment thinking. Aspects of the early Romantic discussion of gender have been dealt with in several feminist studies.<sup>5</sup> These themes include the feminization of philosophy, the significance of the female figure in the development of the male poet, and the literary activity of the female members of the Jena group, Dorothea Veit-Schlegel and Caroline Schlegel-Schelling. While some of the studies in question recognize the progressive nature of the male Romantics' gender critique, feminist critics tend to perceive the female figures in Romantic works as either the archetypal siren-figure, barely concealed male fantasy, or silent statue-like muse, mother or virgin. In short, as Alice Kuzniar points out, the female beloved is usually read as variations on the familiar theme of the 'male ideological construction of woman [...]

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Kant's *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1797) and Humboldt's *Über den Geschlechtsunterschied und dessen Einfluß auf die organische Natur* (1796).

<sup>5</sup> Examples of such studies are cited in Notes 6-12 below.

the distorted mirror or speculum (Luce Irigaray's word), that the man has fashioned to reflect himself'.<sup>6</sup>

However, certain critics have attempted to revise this view and demonstrate that it stems from an underestimation of the complexity of the early Romantics' treatment of gender. Some critics have returned to Romantic texts in order to perform what Adrienne Munich describes as reading signs of 'real female power untapped because unexplicated'.<sup>7</sup> This strategy, which Alice Kuzniar and James Hodkinson have practiced with regard to Novalis, involves recognizing female voices – albeit sometimes as 'ventriloquistic products'<sup>8</sup> – in writing by men, and draws on poststructuralist methods of reading developed by Derrida, Barthes and other critics. Such criticism works on the premise that any given text can give rise to several different readings. But with the critical interest in the Romantic portrayal of woman, we can detect another either/or approach. One group wants to highlight the *invention* of the other, mere object or projection of the male ego (one might say a 'Nicht Ich' in Fichteian terms), and the other group is interested in emphasizing the *recognition* of the other, as an independent and autonomous subject, a 'Du', to borrow a term from Novalis. Kuzniar argues that the former approach is by far the more prevalent, and cites the work of several critics who see Mathilde as no more than a 'catalyst for

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<sup>6</sup> Alice A. Kuzniar, 'Hearing Woman's Voices in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*', *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 1196-1207 (1196). For examples of the kind of criticism which reduces the female figure in this way see Regula Fankhauser, *Des Dichters Sophia: Weiblichkeitsentwürfe im Werk Novalis* (Köln: Böhlau, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Munich, 'Notorious Signs: Feminist Criticism and Literary Tradition', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 252. Cited by Kuzniar, 'Hearing Woman's Voices', p. 1196.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. See also James Hodkinson, 'Genius Beyond Gender: Novalis, Women and the Art of Shapeshifting' *Modern Language Review*, 96 (2001), 103-15.

Heinrich's *Bildung*.'<sup>9</sup> Then, on the other hand, there are critics, including Kuzniar herself, who are interested in the recognition of the female other, an autonomous subject in her own right, and, moreover, one who possesses qualities to which the male poet aspires.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the trouble with both these positions is once more the reduction they entail. In a way, it is much more than mere reductionism or oversimplification. It is to overlook entirely the possibility that, instead of being a helpless victim of contradictions, Novalis is attempting to thematize or demonstrate the paradoxical nature both of subjectivity and femininity. Certain critics, however, occupy a position somewhere between these two and are less interested in deciding whether the Romantics invent or recognize the other than they are in tracing the paradoxes which do seem to accommodate both readings. Mary R. Strand's excellent study of the female other, *I/You: Paradoxical Constructions of Self and Other in Early German Romanticism*,<sup>11</sup> does not attempt to maintain one position at the expense of the other and, as the title of her book suggests, preserves and highlights the contradictory nature of early Romantic constructions of the other. Lisa Roetzel is another critic who avoids an either/or approach. She argues that:

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<sup>9</sup> Kuzniar, 'Hearing Woman's Voices', p. 1197. She continues: 'In [Gail] Newman's reading, woman is handmaiden to the construction of the Romantic, Fichtean ego. [...] Gerlinde Geiger similarly interprets Mathilde as Heinrich's missing complement, and Katharine Padilla sees in her his intermediary and intercessor.' See Gail Newman, 'The Status of the Subject in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and Kleist's *Die Marquise von O...*', *German Quarterly*, 62 (1989), 59-71, and Gerlinde Geiger, 'Weiblichkeit in den Schriften von Frauen und Männern: Ein Vergleich' in *Kontroversen, alte und neue, VI: Frauensprache – Frauenliteratur? Für und wider einer Psychoanalyse literarischer Werke* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), pp. 97-103.

<sup>10</sup> Kuzniar's article takes as its starting point the idea that Mathilde embodies poetry. 'If Mathilde personifies "[d]en sichtbare[n] Geist des Gesanges", and Fabel, in Klingsohr's tale, is what her name betokens, then woman puts man in an impossible position: short of getting a sex change, he cannot master what she already is.' 'Hearing Woman's Voices', p. 1198.

<sup>11</sup> Mary R. Strand, *I/You: Paradoxical Constructions of Self and Other in Early German Romanticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

reading Early German Romanticism with respect to gender means situating oneself within the tension between revolutionary approaches to the feminine and the persistence of established gender politics. [...] Early German Romanticism is progressive in its centering of the feminine in philosophical discourse as well as its advocacy of women's rights to participate in the philosophical discussion. However, it fails to recognize its own participation in the oppression of women.<sup>12</sup>

The contradictory nature of the Romantics' gender critique and other questions raised by feminist readings of Novalis are fascinating in themselves. However, I am less interested in general questions about the constructedness of Woman than I am in looking in more fundamental terms at the relationship between self and other. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, this plays out in the relationship between the protagonist and a *female* other, but for Derrida it is the death of Paul de Man which provides the impetus for several moving texts on friendship, mourning, and the impossible desire to speak to the other who has died.

In Novalis's work, the role of the female beloved in the male poet's attainment of identity relies on language, and one of Derrida's major preoccupations is the problem of language as the medium through which the subject comes into being and the only means by which this subject can attempt to relate to the other.<sup>13</sup> Without going so far as to suggest that Derrida's work on the way in which we relate to other subjects allows us to read Novalis in an entirely new way, I think that a Derridean perspective on Novalis's portrayal of the (female) beloved provides a good

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<sup>12</sup> Lisa C. Roetzel, 'Feminizing Philosophy', in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 361-381 (p. 363).

<sup>13</sup> *Psyche: Invention de l'autre, Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, and *L'oreille de l'autre* are some examples of this but one could argue that Derrida's entire oeuvre is concerned with finding the trace of the other.

framework for considering it in the way that critics like Strand and Roetzel have done; that is, without having to choose between the two stances taken by feminist critics which I outlined above. Once more, it is the awareness of paradox, a willingness to endure aporia, and respect for alterity which reveal interesting correspondences between Novalis and Derrida. This is not to say that a paradoxical relation to the other is not already in Novalis's texts, but in this chapter – perhaps to a greater extent than in the others – an understanding of Derrida helps to shed more light on the aporia. The idea of a paradoxical relation is essentially what emerges from Novalis's approach to questions of the absolute. We considered in some detail in Chapter 1 the way in which the endurance of aporia is the only possible relation to the absolutely-other – or, as it turns out, a kind of non-relation. It is not that we can directly equate the desire of philosophy to grasp the absolute with the human desire to *know* another person. But tracing the movement of this desire and the ensuing interrelation will reveal a paradoxical structure familiar to us from the philosophy of consciousness. This chapter reprises all the themes from the earlier chapters and, even more clearly than the others, reminds us – if we needed reminding – of the ways in which writers like Derrida and Novalis can help us to understand much more than philosophy and literature. The focus on how we relate to others in love and friendship shows not only that 'real life', love, philosophy and literature are far from mutually exclusive, but also that their mutual transformations make us who we are.

## Love and Poetry

Love has always been one of the major themes of writing, both ‘philosophical’ and ‘literary’. This long and fruitful relationship can be traced from Plato through to Petrarch, from Shakespeare to the eighteenth-century literature of Sensibility, and, indeed, from Romanticism to the present day. Writers, it seems, have always wanted to write about love. Because of this, the relationship between ‘love’ and ‘literature’ is one in which it is relatively easy to see at work something akin to the logic of supplementarity. By this I mean that we can view ‘love’ as something not only outside literature, which literature takes as its object, but also as the creation, the offspring, of literature: something called into being by the very writing which pretends to (re)present it. But this is not all because, as we shall see, the logic of supplementarity also requires us to see love, not only as the creation of literature, but also as *constitutive* of literature. In other words, what we call literature cannot exist without what we call love, what literature has taught us to call love. It is not only twentieth-century writers who are aware of this. Emma Bovary is one literary heroine who discovers the dangerous supplementarity in the relationship between love and books and, in some of his love sonnets, Shakespeare plays with and deconstructs the conventions of love poetry upon which the other sonnets rest. Jonathan Culler gives an excellent example of this:

Shakespeare’s sonnet ‘My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun’ takes up the metaphors used in the tradition of love poetry and denies them (‘But no such roses see I in her cheeks’) – denies them as a way of praising a woman

who 'when she walks, treads on the ground.' The poem has meaning in relation to the tradition that makes it possible.<sup>14</sup>

The play of mutual transformations between love and literature, as well as the confusion of boundaries, means that love is always a slippery concept, its meaning and scope already subject to shifts in meaning from age to age, and from author to author. And, in the works of Novalis and the other Jena Romantics, 'Liebe' is a particularly complex idea precisely because, like Plato, they are interested in love not only as a social phenomenon or 'real-life' emotion, but also as a philosophical concept and universal force – even as shorthand for a kind of literary operation. In his introduction to a small collection of Novalis's writings on love, Gerhard Kurz describes how the concept of love takes on new dimensions in the eighteenth century in the works of Goethe, Rousseau and Richardson:

In seinem [i.e. Novalis's], dem 18. Jahrhundert, dem Zeitalter der Aufklärung, waren im Namen der Liebe nicht nur gesellschaftliche Konventionen angegriffen worden, sondern man hatte auch begonnen, in der Liebe dem Zusammenhang von Emotionen, Affekten und Trieben, von Idealen und körperlicher Realität nachzuspüren.<sup>15</sup>

One of the themes this chapter deals with, then, is the way in which Novalis and Derrida articulate the connections between love and literature. Beginning with Novalis's philosophical treatment of the subject-object relationship, we will go on to examine the role of language in finding and inventing the other and, finally, to mourning and the problematic of the mirror.

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<sup>14</sup> Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Novalis über die Liebe*, ed. Gerhard Kurz (Frankfurt and Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 2001), p. 15.



**'Le Sujet est une fable.'**<sup>16</sup>

In the work of Novalis, the question of the relation between love and poetry is inextricably bound up with the question of the self. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Novalissian ego is constituted by its radical temporality. The 'Wechselwirkung' or 'Rollentausch', elaborated in the 'Fichte-Studien', operates between the knowledge of the self as represented object and the state of absolute but already lost identity of the self and self-consciousness – this already lost unity cannot be *known*; it is non-knowledge. These are related by a process of continual representation which does not allow for a coincidence of knowing and being. The important thing to remember about the figure of the 'Rollentausch', for the purposes of this chapter on love and the human other, is that neither pole is given precedence; indeed, the radical temporality of self-consciousness means that each element is never even (present to) itself. We discussed Novalis's questioning of Fichte's insistence on a stable and self-identical transcendental ego, 'das Absolute Ich'. This absolute and unconditioned ego ought to function as the ground of all knowledge and cognition. The external world is, therefore, assimilated into the all-encompassing Absolute Ego, and Fichte's system cannot be permitted to acknowledge that there is a radical alterity at work. In *Über die Würde des Menschen* (1794), he states: 'Die Philosophie lehrt uns alles im Ich aufsuchen. Erst durch das Ich kommt Ordnung und Harmonie in die todte formlose Masse.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Points de suspension: Entretiens* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), p. 279.

<sup>17</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845), vol. I, pp. 412-13.

For Novalis, conversely, the ego relates to the external other, the world, in exactly the same way that it relates to itself – that is, it *represents* the world to itself. This difference between Fichte and Novalis, though certainly explicit in the ‘Fichte-Studien’, is not always glaringly obvious in the other work. This explains in part why the perception of Novalis as the poet of a subjective idealism bordering on the solipsistic has proved so persistent.<sup>18</sup> However, it is a highly significant difference, and the understanding of Novalis’s version of self-consciousness gives us the means to identify paradoxical constructions of the (human) other in the more overtly ‘literary’ works, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in particular. Géza von Molnár argues convincingly that the insights of the ‘Fichte-Studien’ underpin all of Novalis’s work, and he describes the difference between Fichte and Novalis as follows:

For Fichte, the decisive aspect is the ego’s absolute autonomy and the object’s corresponding lack of it. [...] Novalis, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the ego’s absolute unity in its empirical manifestation as that common point of balanced neutrality which alone guarantees the harmonious correspondence of subject and object. The harmonious correspondence of outer world and inner world is the ego’s absolute heritage, and it constitutes the basis of all that we call experience.<sup>19</sup>

When Molnár calls the Novalissian ego ‘that common point of balanced neutrality which alone constitutes the harmonious correspondence of subject and object’, he is pointing towards a quasi-Levinasian concept of ethics which respects the radical alterity and autonomy of the other. For Novalis the object – be it world or human

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<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Kurz indicates another factor contributing to the enduring perception of Novalis as ‘[ein] todessüchtige[r] Träumer von ewiger Liebe als Kompensation für die ihm versagte irdische’. Kurz suggests that it stems partly from the fact that most of Novalis’s works emerged only after his death, and then were published in bits and pieces over many years. *Novalis über die Liebe*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Géza von Molnár, *Novalis’ ‘Fichte-Studies’: The Foundation of His Aesthetics* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1970), p. 29.

other – is not merely ‘Nicht Ich’; the ego is not given a transcendental status and the non-ego is not subjugated or assimilated. The whole concept of an absolute ego is analogous to the way in which philosophy defines itself and takes its meaning *by not being* an inferior or secondary other – myth, writing, or sophistics. For Novalis, the ego stands in relation to an ‘object’ of consciousness (world or human other) which is *radically* other. We can argue, following Levinas and Derrida, that this other is not, strictly speaking, an ‘object’, with all that this word implies of appropriation and assimilation. The following very important fragment from the ‘Fichte-Studien’ reiterates this and, moreover, gives us a vitally important insight into Novalis’s model of the way in which the relation of the ego to the external other emerges in the same way as the ego’s relation to itself:

Kriticism [...] läßt uns die Natur, oder *Außenwelt*, als ein menschliches Wesen ahnden – Sie zeigt, daß wir *alles* nur so verstehn können und sollen, wie wir uns selbst und unsere *Geliebten*, uns und *euch* verstehen. [...] Jetzt sehn wir die wahren Bande der Verknüpfung von Subject und Object – sehn, daß es auch eine Außenwelt in uns giebt, die mit unserm Innern in einer analogen Verbindung, wie die Außenwelt außer uns mit unserm Äußern und jene und diese so verbunden sind, wie unser Innres und Äußres. [...] Nun erscheint die sogenannte Transscendentalphilosophie – die Zurückweisung [sic] ans Subject – der *Idealism*, und die Kategorieen – der Zusammenhang zwischen Object und Vorstellung in einem ganz neuen *Lichte*. [...] Selbstheit ist der Grund aller *Erkenntniß* – als der Grund der Beharrlichkeit im Veränderlichen – auch das Princip der höchsten *Mannichfaltigkeit* – (*Du.*) (Statt Nicht Ich – *Du.*)<sup>20</sup>

The shift in emphasis resulting from Novalis’s replacement of the Fichtean ‘Nicht Ich’ with ‘Du’ complicates the simple opposition of ‘Ich’ and ‘Nicht Ich’, whereby the ‘Ich’ is reflected back to itself by the ‘Nicht Ich’, and inaugurates instead a far more complex and asymmetrical process of interrelation with the other. Furthermore,

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<sup>20</sup> N III, p. 429-30, ‘Das Allgemeine Brouillon’, no. 820.

since the process by which the ego relates to both the otherness within and the external other consists of an ever-changing dynamic process – a ‘Schweben’ or ‘Wechselwirkung’ between subjective and objective moments – Novalis’s account of the self cannot possibly accommodate the notion of a self which is identical with itself and whose only act of reflection is thus a specular one. We might be tempted to read the phrase, ‘Selbstheit ist der Grund aller *Erkenntniß* – als der Grund der Beharrlichkeit im Veränderlichen’, as a desire to re-inscribe an absolute and immutable ground. However, the phrase can also be read as an acknowledgement that even a de-centred, destabilized ‘Selbstheit’ is the only constant which guarantees ‘*Erkenntnis*’, the cognition of the infinite multiplicity of the world. There is no escaping the fact that it is the ego which opens up the very possibility of this respect. Derrida, too, would concede this. But the point is that there would be no *demand* for respect without the absolute alterity of the other. The Novalissian self can rightly be regarded as a de-centred self. It is not a selfsame essence but rather a never-ending process of inscription and re-inscription which takes place (if we can even talk of a ‘taking *place*’ in this context) in time and in the attempts at communication between the self and its various others. For Novalis, the self can only achieve its own identity through its temporal interrelation with an other, be this the other within, the world, or another human subject. Where Fichte’s ego gives life to the ‘todte formlose Masse’ of a reality entirely dependent on the ego, the Novalissian subject, as we can see from the above quotation, always already perceives reality as a living and subjective other. As Elizabeth Mitman and Mary Strand put it, this contrasts sharply with the stasis which characterizes Fichte’s absolute ego: ‘Nature, as an “outside other”, prevents the I from ossifying itself from within: the I must rearrange its relationships

with the world as it encounters independent others, such as nature and the You.’<sup>21</sup>

The shift from a ‘Nicht-Ich’ to a ‘Du’ is a beautifully concise way of conceptualizing this vital difference between Fichte and Novalis, and provides a reference point for mapping these affinities with poststructuralist thinking on the subject-object relation.

## A New Realism

What Molnár calls the ‘harmonious correspondence’ between self and other is a schema which also underlines the early Romantics’ conception of literature. For Novalis and Derrida, the acknowledgement of a radical alterity is essential – indeed, is *constitutive* of self-consciousness. But beyond the otherness within, there is the movement of an active desire to know the external other. It would be an impoverished person indeed, who did not *desire* to know the other, even while feeling the constriction of the double bind which dictates that this knowing would destroy the very otherness which provokes the desire to know. It is in our attempts at communication with others (through the signs and supplements from which the self also emerges) that we evolve as complex human subjects. And poetry, too, would be poorer without this desire for and interaction with the other. In the above quotation, Novalis describes the ‘Du’ as the ‘Princip der höchsten *Mannichfaltigkeit*’. And, in similar vein, Friedrich Schlegel maintains that, without *actively* seeking some kind of

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Mitman and Mary R. Strand, ‘Self and Other in Early German Romanticism’, in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. by Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp 47-71 (p. 52). Strand and Mitman also recognize the remarkable affinities between Novalis’s thinking on the subject and poststructuralist theories of consciousness. They do not mention Derrida, however, focusing instead on Lacan’s work on language and psychoanalysis.

interrelation with otherness, in the sense of the multiplicity of the world, poetry would be lifeless.

This poetic desire is described as 'Liebe' in the 'Rede Über die Mythologie'. In this text, Schlegel points out that one of the dangers in the philosophical turn towards the subject is a shift away from 'Natur' and the outside world. He praises the insights of Transcendental Idealism into subjectivity and, furthermore, recognizes that 'modern' poetry is the very expression of subjectivity and creative imagination. However, he argues that Idealism alone is not enough, and laments the way in which Spinoza, with his nature-philosophy, has been dethroned by philosophy's new gods, in particular, by Fichte.<sup>22</sup> There is simply no room for nature in Fichte's system; as Strand and Mitman put it, 'for this philosopher of consciousness, nature is in a sense beyond the I'.<sup>23</sup> Schlegel is not advocating the total abandonment of Idealism. Indeed, he recognizes, in the wake of Descartes and Kant, that: 'in Gestalt der Philosophie oder gar eines Systems wird der Realismus nie wieder auftreten können.'<sup>24</sup> The whole point about this new realism is that it emerges from Idealism, and, according to Schlegel, only poetry can express this harmonious interaction:

Und selbst nach einer allgemeinen Tradition ist es zu erwarten, daß dieser neue Realismus, weil er doch idealischen Ursprungs sein, und gleichsam auf idealischem Grund und Boden schweben muß, als Poesie erscheinen wird, die ja auf der Harmonie des Ideellen und Reellen beruhen soll.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-), vol. II, p. 316.

<sup>23</sup> Strand and Mitman, 'Self and Other in Early German Romanticism', p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Schlegel, vol. II, p. 315.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Schlegel calls for a new realism, a new 'Mythologie', which will revive the 'tote Leichnam der Poesie' and asks: 'was ist jede schöne Mythologie anders als ein hieroglyphischer Ausdruck der umgebenden Natur in dieser Verklärung von Fantasie und Liebe?'<sup>26</sup> Novalis's Klingsohr, the poet who becomes Heinrich von Ofterdingen's mentor, says in similar vein, 'die Liebe ist stumm, nur die Poesie kann für sie sprechen. Oder die Liebe ist selbst nichts, als die höchste Naturpoesie.'<sup>27</sup>

Love, then, is one name for the interrelation with an other which cannot simply be reduced to *that which is not I*. Deconstruction is so pertinent to the writings of Novalis precisely because the power and fascination of deconstruction comes from the awareness of the other which cannot be reduced to the same. We have already discussed interesting similarities in the types of (mis)reading which characterize the critical literature on both Novalis and Derrida. The specific problem of the subject-object relation highlights further parallels between the way in which the Romantic understanding of Idealism has been (mis)represented in some of the older criticism and the way in which certain commentators have (mis)understood deconstruction. Of the Romantics, Paul Roubiczek, for instance, says that the 'one-sided interpretation of Kant makes them both forget the impact of external reality and the impossibility of absolute knowledge'.<sup>28</sup> Yet, as I have outlined above and as more recent readings like those of Strand and Mitman have shown, Novalis's shift in emphasis from 'Nicht Ich' to 'Du' – not to mention Schlegel's demand for a 'new realism' – is clear evidence of a desire to escape from the specular reflection of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>27</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 287.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Roubiczek, 'Some aspects of German Philosophy in the Romantic Period', in *The Romantic Period in Germany: Essays by Members of the London University Institute of Germanic Studies*, ed. by Siegbert Praver (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 305-25 (p. 306).



Fichteian Absolute Ego and answer the call of that external other without which there would be no need for language. Similarly, Derrida has repeatedly been forced to answer the criticism of those who would claim that he is only concerned with the empty play of self-referential signifiers, when he is actually concerned precisely with that which is *beyond* such specular reflection. As he himself says, 'to distance oneself [...] from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language. [...] Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other.'<sup>29</sup>

## Finding and Inventing

The shift from a Fichteian 'Nicht Ich' to a Novalissian 'Du' certainly indicates 'an openness towards the other'. We must now begin to consider this openness in terms of the distinction between 'finding' and 'inventing' which I outlined above with regard to readings of the female beloved. However, we cannot simply say that the 'Nicht Ich' is the self's invention of the other, while the 'Du' is the other which is recognized or found by the self. The same logic of supplementarity which complicates the oppositions we considered in Chapter 2 also infects the inventing/finding opposition.<sup>30</sup> The love story of Heinrich von Ofterdingen and

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', interview with Richard Kearney, in *Dialogues with Contemporary Critical Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. by Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 107-26 (pp. 123-24).

<sup>30</sup> Gail Newman, in a fascinating comparative study of Novalis with the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, is also interested in complicating the finding/inventing opposition and in demonstrating that the subject can be 'creative' and 'receptive' at the same time. See Gail M. Newman, *Locating the*

Mathilde illustrates the complexity of this opposition. Heinrich meets Mathilde and, thanks to her love and teaching, is finally able to bring his budding poetic potential to fruition. The idea is repeatedly reinforced that, without love, the poet cannot attain (poetic) self-consciousness. However, this does not simply reduce Mathilde to a function of Heinrich's development. A close reading of the love story, juxtaposed with Derrida's writings on the loss of a loved one, will help us trace the strange logic which infects the finding/inventing opposition and always already complicates the subject-object relation.

In *Donner la mort*, Derrida tells us: '*Tout autre est tout autre*.'<sup>31</sup> The English translation, even though – or perhaps *because* – it is more unwieldy, unpicks and lays out the implications of the phrase. 'Autre' – and, of course, this also applies to 'other' – can be both noun and adjective. But the word 'tout' in French, as well as signifying 'all' or 'every(one)', also functions as the qualifier 'complete' or 'completely'. Perhaps the best translation is something like 'every other (one) is every (bit) other.'<sup>32</sup> J. Hillis Miller points out, however, that any translation must arrest the 'trembling' or 'vibrations'<sup>33</sup> between several possible meanings of the phrase. As well as declaring in tautological fashion that 'every other is every other', it also says something like '*every other person is wholly other*'. It is in this second sense that Derrida tries to describe the respect we owe to the other person, who is singularly other, radically other than us. And in *Psyché*, playing with the ambiguity –

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*Romantic Subject: Novalis with Winnicott* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> This is the rendering of David Wills, translator of the original version of 'Donner la mort', first published in *L'éthique du don: Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don*, ed. by Jean Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzell (Paris: Métailié 1992). The translation was published as *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Others', in *Applying: To Derrida*, p. 162.

in both English and French – of the phrase ‘invention de l’autre’, Derrida says in the text which bears this title:

L’invention *de* l’autre, cela implique-t-il que l’autre reste encore *moi, en moi, de moi*, aux mieux *pour moi* (projection, assimilation, intériorisation, introjection, appréhension analogique, au mieux phénoménalité)? Ou bien que mon invention de l’autre reste l’invention de moi par l’autre qui me trouve, me découvre, m’institue or me constitue? À me venir de lui, l’invention de l’autre alors lui reviendrait.<sup>34</sup>

Seen in juxtaposition, these two quotations from Derrida highlight the peculiar paradox of our relationship with otherness. It is this paradox which lies at the heart of the final dream in the first part of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* – the one in which Heinrich dreams of Mathilde’s death. As the ‘Fichte-Studien’ make clear, for Novalis the self only attains awareness of itself through some kind of interrelation with the other. The ‘essentially imperialistic’<sup>35</sup> suppression of the otherness of the other by the Fichtean Absolute Ego has no place in Novalis’s schema. Novalis’s other is a ‘Du’ which is – at least in theory – regarded as autonomous, a thinking subject in its own right. In the view of some feminist critics, as we saw above, Novalis is unsuccessful in creating female characters who convincingly embody this idea of woman as ‘Du’, as autonomous subject, in the narrative texts. This applies perhaps in particular to Mathilde in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. However, I would argue that we must consider the possibility that Novalis is not just attempting to portray the otherness of *woman* but reflecting on the idea of otherness itself, which involves considering the (necessary and paradoxical) simultaneity of the construction of the

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<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Newman, *Locating the Romantic Subject*, p. 21.

other and communication with the other. In a sense, *for* Heinrich Mathilde only exists *within* Heinrich. As Derrida reminds us:

C'est à l'intérieur, si on peut dire (mais justement il y va d'une effraction de l'intérieur) du présent vivant, cette *Urform* de l'expérience transcendente, que le sujet compose avec du non-sujet et que *l'ego* se trouve marqué, sans pouvoir faire l'expérience originaire et présentative, par du non-ego et surtout de l'*alter ego*. L'*alter ego* ne peut pas se présenter, devenir une présence originaire pour l'*ego*.<sup>36</sup>

We have to keep in mind the apparent contradiction that Mathilde's otherness is both recognized *and* invented, in as much as either of these is at all possible in life or within the literary text. But perhaps it is more accurate to say that the distinction between recognizing (or finding) and inventing is complicated by the folding back of supplementarity. Derrida warns that true invention is impossible. Hillis Miller's explication of Derrida's insistence on the impossibility of invention is admirably succinct:

'Invention' in the rhetorical context (Latin *inventio*) means both innovation and finding. The art of *inventio* is finding the appropriate material for a given purpose (an argument or a poem), taking it from what is already there in the storehouse of commonplaces or common places, places we all hold in common as members of Graeco-Latin-Hebrew-Christian culture. As Derrida argues, [...], powerful institutional assumptions in art, technology, science, law, theology and philosophy urge us to think of invention as the discovery of something which fits into the programme of what is already known and already institutionalised, something that is possible on the basis of what we already know. [...] Such an invention 'revient au même' (returns to the same). It returns the other to the same.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Points de suspension: Entretiens*, p. 278.

<sup>37</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Others', in *Applying: To Derrida*, p. 167.

In terms of the ego and its relation to others, we see how a similar confusion between finding and inventing runs the risk of returning the other to the same. And yet we have no choice but to invent and to *fail* to invent. The impossible becomes possible. Newman finds two phrases from Novalis's texts which seem to name this paradoxical simultaneity. What she calls the 'Novalian self' engages in both finding and inventing 'at the same time':

The Novalian self invests found objects and events with special significance, it is a 'Liebhaber des Schicksals'.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the Novalian self creates objects and then declares them to exist objectively, it is a 'magischer Idealist'.<sup>39</sup>

The complex narrative and temporal structure of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* reveals the simultaneity of recognition and invention which constitutes our relationships with other subjects. Upon meeting Mathilde for the first time, Heinrich recognizes her in retrospect as the face in the blue flower which he has seen in dreams. This idea of recognition is admittedly compatible with the view that Mathilde is a mere concretization of her Platonic idea, which sits uneasily with the notion of true alterity and autonomy. It is true that Heinrich does tell Mathilde:

'Könntest du nur sehn, wie du mir erscheinst, welches wunderbare Bild deine Gestalt durchdringt und mir überall entgegen leuchtet, du würdest kein Alter fürchten. Deine irdische Gestalt ist nur ein Schatten dieses Bildes [...]; das Bild ist ein ewiges Urbild, ein Teil der unbekannten heiligen Welt.'<sup>40</sup>

This and similar quotations have been used by critics to suggest that Mathilde is a

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<sup>38</sup> N II, p. 597, no. 333.

<sup>39</sup> N III, p. 384-85, no. 638. Cited by Newman, *Locating the Romantic Subject*, p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 288-89.

manifestation of the Ideal Woman, who merely functions as the male poet's mediator between the earthly realm and the absolute, transcendental sphere. However, I find this reading inadequate on several levels and would argue that we cannot identify what Heinrich says at this point as representing one single coherent view. Nor should it be confused with the voice of Novalis. Throughout the novel, Heinrich is a somewhat passive hero who gives voice to several conflicting ideas and perspectives. In fact, John Neubauer sees this as one aspect of the novel which lends itself well to postmodernist criticism. He asks: 'Ist nicht gerade die Abwesenheit eines starken Subjektes, eines dominierenden Erzählers, was *Ofterdingen* "dezentralisiert" und den verschiedenen Stimmen erst Raum gewährt?'<sup>41</sup> It seems to me that the reading of Mathilde as a mediator between earthly and transcendental spheres curtails Heinrich's freedom as receptive and creative (if nonetheless de-centred) subject. Secondly, the novel as a whole, as well as many of Novalis's other works, acknowledges the fictionality of any kind of absolute, including Platonic ideas or a divine transcendental realm. Therefore, to read Mathilde as no more than a one-dimensional concretization of the ideal entirely overlooks one of the most interesting aspects of the novel – the role of language in the invention of the other. Novalis tells us that 'das oberste Princip muß schlechterdings Nichts Gegebenes, sondern ein Frey Gemachtes, ein *Erdichtetes*, *Erdachtes* sein'.<sup>42</sup> As we have seen in Chapters 1 and 3, the absolute, the 'unbekannte heilige Welt' and the golden age are necessary constructs, but their status *as* constructs is acknowledged and all transcendental underpinnings called into question.

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<sup>41</sup> John Neubauer, 'Novalis und der Postmodernismus', in *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität: Studien zur deutschen Literatur seit der Romantik: Festschrift für Hans-Joachim Mähl*, ed. by Klaus-Detlef Müller et al. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), pp. 207-20 (p. 215).

<sup>42</sup> N II, p. 273, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 568.

*Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, developing one of the main themes from the philosophical studies, continually foregrounds the functioning of language in the complex process of finding/inventing the other. The famous ‘Blaue Blume’ is not invented by Heinrich but rather comes to him from an external source. Having looked at the beginning of the novel in the chapter on nonclosure, I want to return to it briefly because it demonstrates that Novalis is concerned with thematizing the finding/inventing activity, and not only in relation to the human beloved. The blue flower first appears in the tales of the mysterious stranger and, significantly, we do not hear or read the tales first-hand in the text. The result of this second-hand experience for both Heinrich and the reader is that any attempt to find the origin of the blue flower *outside* narrative and language is thwarted. But we are certainly privy to Heinrich’s reception of the stories as he lies in bed, reflecting on what the stranger has told him:

Der Jüngling lag unruhig auf seinem Lager, und gedachte des Fremden und seiner Erzählungen. ‘Nicht die Schätze sind es, die ein so unaussprechliches Verlangen in mir geweckt haben,’ sagte er zu sich selbst; ‘fern ab liegt mir alle Habsucht: aber die blaue Blume sehn’ ich mich zu erblicken. Sie liegt mir unaufhörlich im Sinn, und ich kann nichts anderes dichten und denken.’<sup>43</sup>

On the very first page of the novel, we see a found or received object become part of the subject, something which will continue to be re-invented as the novel progresses (‘ich kann nichts anderes *dichten und denken*’). The received/invented blue flower is thus never wholly other and is never wholly part of the protagonist’s self. In the dream which follows these thoughts, another manifestation of the ‘found’ flower takes on a human face: ‘die Blütenblätter zeigten einen blauen ausgebreiteten

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<sup>43</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 195.



Kragen, in welchem ein zartes Gesicht schwebte.’<sup>44</sup> At a later stage in his journey, after his first meeting with Mathilde, Heinrich puzzles over the feeling that he recognizes her face from a picture in the hermit’s mysterious and obscure book:

Welcher sonderbare Zusammenhang ist zwischen Mathilden und dieser Blume? Jenes Gesicht, das aus dem Kelche sich mir entgegenneigte, es war Mathildens himmlisches Gesicht, und nun erinnere ich mich auch, es in jenem Buche gesehen zu haben. Aber warum hat es dort mein Herz nicht so bewegt?<sup>45</sup>

The meeting with the ‘real’ Mathilde, another human subject, but also in a sense a found object, provides the focus for another re-working of the found symbol of the blue flower. What we have here is, in effect, a conflation of finding and inventing. It is impossible to tell where the ‘real’ Mathilde begins and where the ‘invented’ Mathilde ends. She can never be *wholly* other and yet she can never be wholly the same – she must remain radically other. That, as Derrida tells us, is the essential paradoxical structure of our relation with all others. He says:

Nous ne pouvons vivre cette expérience que sous la forme de l’aporie, aporie du deuil et de la prosopopée: la possible reste impossible, *la réussite échoue*, l’intériorisation fidèle qui porte l’autre et le comporte en moi (en nous), vivant et mort à la fois, elle fait de l’autre une *partie* de nous, entre nous – et l’autre paraît alors n’être plus l’autre précisément parce que nous le pleurons et le portons *en nous*, comme un enfant encore à naître, comme un avenir.<sup>46</sup>

But he reminds us that, conversely, the failure succeeds: ‘l’échec réussit,’ in that we must fail to fully assimilate or interiorize the other: ‘l’intériorisation qui avorte, c’est

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, p. 54.

à la fois le respect de l'autre comme autre, une sorte de tendre rejet, un mouvement de renoncement qui le laisse seul, dehors, là-bas, dans sa mort, hors de nous.<sup>47</sup>

Novalis, with his concept of the 'Mittelwesen', here reformulates the aporia, and displays a similar awareness of the way in which mediation through signs prevents direct and simple access to the other:

Das Ich glaubt ein fremdes Wesen zu sehen – durch Approximation desselben entsteht ein andres Mittelwesen – das Produkt – was dem Ich zugehört, und was zugleich dem Ich nicht zuzugehören scheint – Die Mittelresultate des Processes sind die Hauptsache – das zufällig gewordene – oder gemachte Ding – ist das Verkehrt Beabsichtigte.<sup>48</sup>

Crucially, although signs and supplements are the only means of finding/inventing the other, their necessity is precisely that which is entirely incompatible with the unmediated experience of otherness. But what happens upon the death of the other? When we can no longer speak to the other, but only to the memory of the other in ourselves?

## **Mourning (of) the Other**

Part of what makes Derrida's texts on de Man so moving is his description of the terrible solitude we experience upon recognizing that the death of the other literally brings us back to the self. No matter how much we wish to speak to the other we can only speak to the memory of the other in ourselves:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> N III, p. 372-73, 'Das Allgemeine Brouillon', no. 601.

L'être 'en nous,' l'être 'en nous' de l'autre, dans la mémoire endeuillée, ce ne peut être ni la résurrection proprement dite de l'autre *lui-même* (l'autre est mort et rien ne peut l'en sauver, personne ne peut nous en sauver) ni la simple inclusion d'un fantasme narcissique dans une subjectivité close sur elle-même.<sup>49</sup>

But this does not mean *only* narcissism or pure 'interior speculation'. As Derrida says, 'la structure narcissique est trop paradoxale et trop rusée pour que ce mot nous donne le mot de la fin.'<sup>50</sup> He continues:

Si narcissisme il y avait, sa structure resterait assez complexe pour que l'autre, mort ou vivant, ne s'y réduise pas au même. Déjà installé dans la structure narcissique, l'autre marque assez le soi du rapport à soi, il le conditionne assez tôt pour que l'être 'en nous' de la mémoire endeuillée soit *venue* de l'autre, une venue de l'autre, et même, si terrifiante que puisse devenir cette pensée, la *première* venue de l'autre.<sup>51</sup>

Derrida suggests here that the self only emerges thanks to the other. If, indeed, everything remains 'within me' or 'within us' upon the death of the other, we need to ask what constitutes this 'within me'? Derrida expresses what we learnt from Novalis in the first chapter: '[...] *nous* ne sommes jamais *nous-mêmes*, et entre nous, identiques à nous, un 'moi' n'est jamais en lui-même, identique à lui-même.'<sup>52</sup> With bereavement we are thrown back upon memory, and just as Plato had to concede the finitude of memory, we find that this finitude is death, and that the work of memory consists only of traces of a past which has never been fully present. Memory is

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<sup>49</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

always already constituted by the signs and supplements of the non-present with which it is necessarily in relation.

The death of the other re-marks this finitude, sheds 'more light' on it. But the other does not have to die for the mourning to begin. Death and mourning are always already inscribed in the relation. In the following long quotation, Derrida begins by speaking of the memory of the other who has died but he goes on to demonstrate how this equally applies to our relation with the living other:

Si la mort arrive à l'autre et nous arrive par l'autre, l'ami n'est plus *qu'en nous, entre nous*. En lui-même, par lui-même, de lui-même, il n'est plus, plus rien. Il ne vit qu'en nous. Mais *nous* ne sommes jamais *nous-mêmes*, [...] un 'moi' n'est jamais en lui-même, identique à lui-même, cette réflexion spéculaire ne se ferme jamais sur elle-même, elle n'apparaît pas *avant* cette *possibilité* du deuil, avant et hors de cette structure d'allégorie et de prosopopée qui constitue d'avance tout 'être-en-nous', 'en-moi', entre nous ou entre soi. Le *Selbst*, le *self*, le soi-même ne s'apparaît que dans cette allégorie endeuillée, dans cette prosopopée hallucinatoire – et avant même que la mort de l'autre n'arrive *effectivement*, comme on dit, dans la 'réalité'. L'étrange situation que je décris ici, par exemple celle de mon amitié avec Paul de Man, m'eût permis de dire ce que je dis avant sa mort. Il suffit que je le sache mortel, qu'il me sache mortel – et il n'est pas d'amitié sans ce savoir de la finitude. Et tout ce que nous inscrivons dans le présent vivant de notre rapport aux autres porte déjà, toujours, une signature de *mémoires d'outre-tombe*.<sup>53</sup>

This shows not only how our relation to the other is structured by language, separation and death, but also reminds us that the 'self' is subject to this same structure. Far from being a question of narcissistic subjectivity – there *is* no self *without* the other. As Derrida puts it a little later:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Le ‘moi’ et le ‘nous’ dont nous parlons alors ne surgissent ou ne se délimitent comme ce qu’ils sont qu’à travers cette expérience de l’autre, et de l’autre comme autre qui peut mourir en laissant en moi ou en nous cette mémoire de l’autre. La terrible solitude qui est la mienne ou la nôtre à la mort de l’autre, c’est elle qui constitue ce rapport à soi qu’on appelle ‘moi,’ ‘nous,’ ‘entre nous,’ ‘subjectivité,’ ‘intersubjectivité,’ ‘mémoire’.<sup>54</sup>

As we saw in Chapter 2 – with regard to Rousseau, Plato and writing – language is always already marked by separation, by the essential possibility that what I say may be read or repeated in the case of my absence or, indeed, in the case of the ultimate absence, my death. Our only possible interaction with the other – and, therefore, with ourselves – must always already be marked by the death of the other.

### **Ich oder Du?: ‘Das Sophienerlebnis’**

All of this can be brought to our consideration of the so-called ‘Sophienerlebnis’, an event to which Novalis critics have accorded enormous importance. From the earliest days of Novalis scholarship, the perception of his work – in particular, of the *Hymnen an die Nacht* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* – has been governed by the argument that it is a direct response to the loss of his young fiancée Sophie von Kühn, a kind of processing of this painful experience. There are various models and theories from critics who take this slant,<sup>55</sup> but few critics have considered Novalis’s relationship to Sophie in terms of the structure of our relation to otherness as described by Derrida. There are suggestions in Novalis’s correspondence that he – quite consciously and deliberately – constructs his own ‘Sophie’ even *before* her

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>55</sup> For an overview, see Uerlings, pp. 278-83.

actual death. This is borne out by the testimony of Novalis himself, as well as that of others, including his brother, Erasmus, who seem all too aware of a certain discrepancy between Novalis's image of Sophie and their impressions of the real-life boisterous twelve-year-old. This suggests the way in which we have always already begun to construct – to invent – the other even before the real-life mourning which always already haunts the relationship. As Derrida puts it in *Mémoires*, the 'within me' and the 'within us':

*ne surgissent et ne s'apparaissent pas avant cette expérience terrible ou du moins avant sa possibilité effectivement ressentie, inscrite en nous, signée. Leur sens et leur portée, ils ne les détiennent que de cette portée en eux de la mort et de la mémoire de l'autre [...].*<sup>56</sup>

The dream sequences in *Ofterdingen*, with all that dreams imply of inner life and the workings of consciousness, are a clever way of portraying both the process of invention, and they also convey the way in which the subject is always already marked by the death of the other. Heinrich and Mathilde's relationship can be read as a literary representation of the radically temporal ego which Novalis works out in the philosophical studies. Heinrich's premonition of the death of his beloved corresponds to Novalis's position in the philosophical studies, namely that the subject is not a self-identical separate entity, anterior to the encounter with the other. In particular, we will focus on the sequence in which Heinrich dreams of Mathilde's death. It is highly significant that Heinrich dreams of the death of his beloved *before* her actual death in the narrative. The scene is thus an excellent literary representation of this invention of the other, its relation to mourning and death, and also the intervention of

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<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, p. 53.

signs and supplements which invent the other while simultaneously preventing the experience of otherness.

Yet without death, and the aphoristic separation of language, there is no desire. Our relation with the other shares the movement of *différance*, which as Derrida says in this quotation from *De la grammatologie*, opens the possibility of desire:

La mort est le mouvement de la différence en tant qu'il est nécessairement fini. C'est dire que la différence rend possible l'opposition de la présence et de l'absence. Sans la possibilité de la différence, le désir de la présence comme telle ne trouverait pas sa respiration. Cela veut dire du même coup que ce désir porte en lui le destin de son inassouvissement. La différence produit ce qu'elle interdit, rend possible cela même qu'elle rend impossible.<sup>57</sup>

In the previous chapter, we looked at 'L'aphorisme à contretemps', comparing its aphoristic structure with the fragmentariness of German Romantic texts. Derrida's beautifully poetic reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as reminding us that the play is perhaps the best-known love story of all, shows how it may be the best love *story* of all, and not only for its motifs of traditional romantic love. The strange fate of the 'star-cross'd lovers' gives Derrida a wonderful way to trace the configuration which links separation with desire, and death with language. As we saw in Chapter 3, their tragedy is not an unfortunate accident but a necessary possibility. In missing each other, twice, and surviving each one in turn to witness the 'death' of the other, their story re-marks the essential impossibility of ever sharing the living present of the other. I can never share the time of the other. But this separation is not to be

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 206.



mourned, because love cannot find its breathing space without this fundamental separation between self and other:

J'aime parce que l'autre est l'autre, parce que son temps ne sera jamais le mien. La durée vivante, la présence même de son amour reste infiniment éloignée de la mienne, éloignée d'elle même dans ce qui la tend vers la mienne, et cela jusque dans ce que l'on voudrait décrire comme l'euphorie amoureuse, la communion extatique, l'intuition mystique. Je ne peux aimer l'autre que dans la passion de cet aphorisme. Celui-ci n'advient pas, il ne survient pas comme le malheur, la malchance ou la négativité. Il a la forme de l'affirmation la plus aimante – il est la chance du désir.<sup>58</sup>

There would be no need for language without aphoristic separation – if I could share the living present of the other, there would be no need to speak. Language simultaneously promises and withholds the possibility of 'breaking the mirror', of penetrating and reaching the other (side). The fact that, in *Ofterdingen*, death is inscribed in Mathilde's relationship with Heinrich from the moment of their first meeting has been used as proof of the absolutization of the love object or as an indication of her status as mediator between the earthly and transcendental spheres. However, I want to consider this dream – in which Heinrich foresees Mathilde's death – in terms of the Derridean re-mark because the scene thematizes the way in which death is already inscribed in language and always haunts our relationship to the other. For Novalis and Derrida, separation – the idea of death – is always already there in the relationship between self and other. Derrida often reflects upon the way in which death haunts the proper name. My name will survive me. Juliet discovers to her cost that 'Romeo' is not *Romeo*. In 'L'aphorisme à contretemps', Derrida

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<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 523.

highlights the terrible irony of Juliet's desire that Romeo 'doff his name'. She argues that it names no part of him, *is not him*. But in the end it is Romeo who dies – 'Romeo' survives:

Roméo et Juliette *sont* des aphorismes, et d'abord dans leur nom qu'ils ne sont pas (Juliet. *'Tis but thy name that is my enemy (...) Romeo. My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, / Because it is an enemy to thee: / Had I it written, I would tear the word*), car il n'y a pas d'aphorisme sans langage, sans nomination, sans appellation, sans lettre même à déchirer.<sup>59</sup>

And, as Derrida demonstrates in 'Signature Événement Contexte', what makes language *language* is the essential possibility that what I say and write may be repeated after my death; separation and death are the very conditions of language. It is death which makes the breaking of the mirror at once more necessary and more difficult, *more impossible*, so to speak.

## Breaking the Mirror

In 'Invention de l'autre', Derrida employs the thematics of the mirror to elucidate the double bind of our desire to speak to the other. In particular, his reading of Ponge's poem 'Fable' demonstrates at the same time the similar paradox which structures the self-referentiality of poetic language. Here is the complete text of 'Fable':

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<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 520.

## FABLE

Par le mot *par* commence donc ce texte  
Dont la première ligne dit la vérité,  
Mais ce tain sous l'une et l'autre  
Peut-il être toléré?  
Cher lecteur déjà tu juges  
Là de nos difficultés ...

(APRÈS sept ans de malheurs  
Elle brisa son miroir).<sup>60</sup>

Derrida's discussion of the poem is at the same time a meditation on the recent death of Paul de Man. He reprises some of the questions of referentiality and the specularity of language, which we dealt with in Chapters 2 and 3. His reading of 'Fable', dedicated to the memory of his friend, demonstrates that these questions are inseparable from our desire to speak (to) the other. Derrida says:

On dirait dans un autre code que *Fable* pose *en acte* la question de la référence, de la specularité du langage *ou* de la littérature, et de la possibilité de dire l'autre ou de parler à l'autre. Nous verrons comment elle le fait mais dès maintenant nous savons qu'il y va justement de la mort, de ce moment du deuil où le bris du miroir est à la fois le plus nécessaire et le plus difficile. Le plus difficile parce que tout ce que nous disons, faisons, pleurons, si tendus que nous soyons vers l'autre, reste *en nous*. Une partie de nous est blessée et c'est de nous que nous nous entretenons encore dans le travail du deuil et de l'*Erinnerung*. Même si cette métonymie de l'autre constituait déjà la vérité et la possibilité de notre rapport à l'autre vivant, la mort la manifeste dans un plus de lumière.<sup>61</sup>

The final dream scene in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (although certainly in less economical fashion than Ponge's poem) also stages what Derrida describes above as

<sup>60</sup> Francis Ponge, 'Fable', *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), vol. 1, p. 114. Cited by Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 19.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 20-21.

the question of the possibility of stating the other or speaking to the other. We saw in Chapter 2 that writing re-marks the essential power of death at the heart of living speech, because it seems to be at an even further remove from the *logos*. Death, being as it is inscribed right from the start in Mathilde and Heinrich's relationship, re-marks – or sheds 'more light' ('un plus de lumière') on – the essential impossibility of the coming together of self and living other. In the night which follows their first meeting, Heinrich dreams that Mathilde is sitting in a canoe on a deep blue stream. Significantly, we are told that she is floating on the '*glatte Fläche*' and that '*ihr himmlisches Gesichte spiegelte sich in den Wellen* [my emphasis]':

Auf einmal fing der Kahn an sich umzudrehen. *Er rief ihr ängstlich zu*. Sie lächelte und legte das Ruder in den Kahn, der sich immerwährend drehte. Eine ungeheure Bangigkeit ergriff ihn. Er stützte sich in den Strom; aber er konnte nicht fort, das Wasser trug ihn. Sie winkte, *sie schien ihm etwas sagen zu wollen*, der Kahn schöpfte schon Wasser; doch lächelte sie mit einer unsäglichen Innigkeit, und sah heiter in den Wirbel hinein. Auf einmal zog es sie hinunter. Eine leise Luft strich über den Strom, *der ebenso ruhig und glänzend floß, wie vorher* [my emphasis].<sup>62</sup>

This episode, which takes place entirely within Heinrich's dream, illustrates perfectly the impossible desire to say something to the 'other in ourselves', and also to hear something from the other. Derrida says: 'Tout ce que nous disons alors de l'ami, et même ce que nous *lui* disons, pour l'appeler, le rappeler, souffrir pour lui avec lui, tout cela reste désespérément *en nous* ou *entre nous* les vivants, sans franchir le miroir d'une certaine speculation.'<sup>63</sup> We cannot fully traverse the mirror and reach the other, the stream/mirror remains 'ebenso ruhig und glänzend wie vorher'. At this point, Heinrich loses consciousness. When he awakes, he is under the stream but,

<sup>62</sup> N I, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 278.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, p. 52.

significantly, he is unaware that this is so – Mathilde has to point out the blue waves overhead:

‘Wo sind wir, liebe Mathilde?’ – ‘Bei unsern Eltern.’ – ‘Bleiben wir zusammen?’ – ‘Ewig,’ versetzte sie, indem sie ihre Lippen an die seinigen drückte, und ihn so umschloß, daß sie nicht wieder von ihm konnte. Sie sagte ihm ein wunderbares geheimes Wort in den Mund, was sein ganzes Wesen durchklang. Er wollte es wiederholen, als sein Großvater rief, und er aufwachte. Er hätte sein Leben darum geben mögen, das Wort noch zu wissen.<sup>64</sup>

Even in this dream-glimpse of the other side of the stream, we find ourselves witnessing the enactment of a Derridean double bind. Here, the lovers appear to have achieved what Heinrich describes in the love-dialogue as the ‘geheimnisvolles Zusammenfließen unsers geheimsten und eigentümlichsten Daseins’ but it is only in this dream-death where for the brief duration of a silent embrace words are no longer necessary. But words come back and we see, after all, that the mirror of language is *not* broken. Derrida, in his reading of ‘Fable’, suggests:

Car nous l’avons vu, si le deuil n’est pas annoncé par le bris du miroir mais survient comme le miroir lui-même, s’il arrive avec la spécularisation, le miroir n’advient à lui-même que par l’intercession du mot’. C’est une invention et une intervention du mot, et même ici du mot ‘mot’. [Here, Derrida is referring to the first line of Ponge’s poem, ‘Par le mot *par* commence donc ce texte,’] Le mot lui-même se réfléchit dans le mot ‘mot’ et dans le nom du nom. Le tain qui interdit la transparence et autorise l’invention du miroir, c’est une trace de langue [...].<sup>65</sup>

Returning to Novalis, we see that the mirror of language, and with it life and longing, are re-introduced when Mathilde says the ‘wonderful secret word’ into Heinrich’s

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<sup>64</sup> N I, p. 279.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 31.

mouth (*not* his ear), and though it resonates through his entire being, he awakens immediately and the living, waking Heinrich cannot remember it. 'Er hätte *sein Leben darum geben mögen*, das Wort noch zu wissen.' And, in fact, he would have to die in order to know the word. And so the novel continues. The impossibility of ever knowing the secret word of the other is the condition of life and of language. The gap between self and other, like the gap between word and meaning, is what makes love possible and keeps the desire to read and write alive.

## Conclusion

### Enduring Paradoxes

As we have seen, both Romanticism and poststructuralism question the idea that a text can or should be closed neatly and definitively. Nevertheless, we can – without promising to be neat or definitive – try to draw together some of the findings which emerge from the direct comparison of a Romantic writer with a poststructuralist. To do so, though, we must return to the beginning and consider once more the either/or approaches to reading which have tended to characterize past discussions of the modernity of Romanticism. In the introduction, I took Nicholas Saul's remarks on the relationship between Romanticism and postmodernism as a starting point. Saul's argument entails setting up a clear alternative: the Romantic is suffused with 'longing for metaphysical plenitude' while the postmodern writer operates in the full awareness of 'metaphysical void.' The two positions are regarded as mutually exclusive. According to such an interpretation, a Romantic poet like Novalis must, in the end, be so utterly different from a postmodern theorist like Derrida that attempts to identify similarities between them can only be regarded as, at best, extremely difficult, and, at worst, redundant. However, as I have shown, the very opposition set up by Saul is itself guaranteed to maintain an unbridgeable gap between Romanticism and poststructuralism. It is by no means so clear-cut when we come to actual Romantic and poststructuralist texts – texts such as those I have read in this study.

In the first chapter we saw that Novalis's outline of a 'de-centred' ego, constantly changing in the flow of time, reveals remarkable affinities with Derridean



thinking on temporality: time, for Derrida, is what constitutes the *différance* of language as much as it does the signs and supplements which make possible the subject's relation to itself. And in more general terms, the discussion of the philosophy of consciousness demonstrates parallels between Romanticism and deconstruction when it comes to addressing the concerns of traditional metaphysics. Novalis's questioning of the attempts of his contemporaries such as Fichte to locate the absolute foundation of philosophy is analogous to Derrida's subversion of philosophy's desire to domesticate the absolutely other in 'violent' prepositional discourse. Apart from striking linguistic resonances in the ways in which they both express their resistance to metaphysics, perhaps the most important similarity between the two writers is manifest in their attention to paradox and aporia. Novalis attitude is best summed up when he asks:

Sollte das höchste Princip das höchste Paradoxon in seiner Aufgabe enthalten? Ein Satz seyn, der schlechterdings keinen Frieden ließe – der immer anzöge, und abstieße – immer von neuen unverständlich würde, so oft man ihn auch schon verstanden hätte? Der unsre Thätigkeit unaufhörlich rege machte – ohne sie je zu ermüden, ohne sie je gewohnt zu werden?<sup>1</sup>

Novalis's insistence on an impossible yet necessary absolute is a paradox which excites further thought and reflection. In Derrida's words, such a paradox can provoke the 'thinking of the path': l'expérience de l'aporie [...] donne ou promet la pensée du chemin, provoque à penser la possibilité même de ce qui reste encore impensable ou impensé, voire impossible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N II, pp. 523-24, 'Logologische Fragmente', no. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), pp. 129-30.

Moving on in the second chapter to examine literature and philosophy as specific forms of discourse, we saw that both Novalis and Derrida reject the assumption that a clear distinction can be drawn between literary and philosophical writing. We found that early Romanticism's desire to address philosophy's failure to accommodate the notion of the absolute has led to a particular conception of literature. This new literature shares features of both philosophy and literature, as well as what we have come to call 'literary theory'. Like modern theory, in particular poststructuralist theory, Romantic literature operates in a self-questioning mode and its self-referentiality, fragmentariness and eschewal of closure articulate the necessary incompatibility of language and the absolutely other. Our reading of Novalis's 'Monolog' revealed affinities with Derridean thinking on language and the subject's control over language, as well as providing an example of how the textual articulation of paradox can give rise to the never-ending undecidability characteristic of Romantic literature.

Further examination of Novalis's and Derrida's strategies for evading or problematizing closure form the main focus of Chapter 3. We saw that the Romantics' preference for fragmentary texts draws attention to the necessary and constitutive incompleteness of all linguistic formulations. To the same end, Derrida not only strives to 're-mark' the textuality of his own texts but also admires writers like Kafka and Mallarmé who do the same. For both Novalis and Derrida, only language which plays with its status *as language* has a chance of respecting the alterity of the Other which cannot be made a direct object of discourse. The final chapter was concerned to show how these questions of respect for alterity extend

beyond literature to describe our relationships with other people. For both Derrida and Novalis, the paradoxical simultaneity of invention of the other and respect for its radical alterity constitutes our relationships with those whom we love.

What links the themes of all four chapters is the significance accorded to paradox in the thought of both Novalis and Derrida. Each chapter encounters different manifestations of the same paradoxical situation. Any absolute – be it total self-presence, the neat closure of the text upon itself, or perfect communion with the Other – would (even if it were possible) mean the end of language, philosophy, time and desire. Derrida expresses succinctly the aporia or double bind in which we find ourselves: ‘Plenitude is the end (the goal), but were it attained, it would be the end (death).’<sup>3</sup> And Novalis says in the ‘Fichte-Studien’: ‘Es können goldne Zeiten erscheinen – aber sie bringen nicht das Ende der Dinge – das Ziel des Menschen ist nicht die goldne Zeit.’<sup>4</sup> But this in no way gives us licence to dismiss all references to transcendence and fulfilment; on the contrary, as I have demonstrated, these play an important role in the works of both Derrida and Novalis. Each in his own way, both writers acknowledge that it is the impossibility of coincidence between discourse and the absolute which keeps alive the desire to think, read and write. And only the unattainability of perfect communion between self and other can give love its breathing space.

Readings which are governed by alternatives such as ‘longing for plenitude/awareness of metaphysical void’ are radically unfaithful in that they simply

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, ‘Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion’, *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> N II, p. 269, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 565.

cannot reveal the paradoxes which structure the texts of Novalis and Derrida. Such readings, therefore, cannot do justice to the complexity of their texts. This also applies to Paul de Man's argument that the Romantic writer can be read as either 'ironist' or 'mystified self'. It is important to note that, for readings which eschew either/or alternatives, it is not a matter of combining or conflating the 'either' and the 'or' in order to achieve a kind of Hegelian sublation of differences. It is, rather, a certain willingness to allow the 'either' *and* the 'or' to remain open and eternally linked by the logic of the aporia. Such a willingness can certainly be attributed to Novalis, a writer who argues that paradox is necessary and displays at times a real delight in allowing a paradox to remain without attempting to achieve a final synthesis. Derrida, as we saw, sometimes describes deconstruction as an 'aporétologie', and the importance he places on aporia has helped shed more light on Novalis's insistence on the irresolvable nature of paradox. Like the other German Romantics, Novalis finds the word 'Schweben' useful for conveying the idea of an irresolvable tension between alternatives:

Alles Seyn, Seyn überhaupt ist nichts als Freyseyn – *Schweben* zwischen Extremen, die nothwendig zu vereinigen und nothwendig zu trennen sind. Aus diesem Lichtpunct des Schwebens strömt alle Realität aus.<sup>5</sup>

The texts of both Novalis and Derrida operate in a state of profound tension. Both writers are content to 'endure' aporias without seeking definitive synthesis or resolution. The concept of a paradoxical relation to that which cannot be finally articulated is of central importance for any reading which seeks to bring together

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<sup>5</sup> N II, p. 266, 'Fichte-Studien', no. 555.

Romanticism and poststructuralism. Tracing the paradoxical formulations in his texts suggests that the image of Novalis – the poet of the Blue Flower, yearning for the unreachable absolute – is simply inadequate in the face of his repeated insistence on an impossible yet necessary absolute, what he describes as ‘eine *nothwendige* Fiction’.<sup>6</sup> The perception of the Romantic poet ‘yearning for metaphysical plenitude’ is analogous to the one-sided interpretations of Derrida which are commonplace in literary criticism today. Derrida’s fascinating analyses of the signs and supplements which constitute both language and the ways in which we come to know ourselves and others have led to his being condemned as a sceptic, who insists on the ‘prison walls of language’ and takes an ‘evil’ pleasure in mocking a whole tradition. And yet, as we have seen again and again throughout this thesis, his rigorous analyses by no means preclude an interest in that which lies beyond language and an insistence upon our ethical obligation to respect the alterity and autonomy of the Other.

One of the most important conclusions to be drawn from a comparison of Novalis and Derrida, then, is that ‘either/or’ approaches to reading are simply inadequate when it comes to appreciating not only their proximity to each other but also the complexity of their texts themselves. And, in a sense, this is a two-pronged conclusion. Firstly, to see the Romantic writer as yearning for absolute plenitude is to underestimate the complexity of the Romantics’ thinking on subjectivity, language and literature and, indeed, on the interrelation between all three. But this is only half the story because Derrida, the postmodern writer, must be painted as a sceptic or

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<sup>6</sup> N II, p. 179, ‘Fichte-Studien’, no. 234.

nihilist in order to maintain the gulf between Romanticism and postmodernism and avoid disturbing the neatness of the opposition. I have demonstrated in this thesis that readings which adhere too strictly to black-and-white alternatives cannot be attuned to the contradictions and paradoxes through which, to put it in the very simplest terms, Novalis's 'scepticism' is every bit as apparent as Derrida's interest in that Other which always already escapes language.

Thinking beyond the scope of this study: readings which complicate an either/or approach and pay attention instead to Romantic paradoxes have a wider relevance for the debate on the modernity of Romanticism, and can tell us something about where we find ourselves in relation to the Romantic era. It cannot be denied that Novalis and other early Romantics, such as Friedrich Schlegel, refer unceasingly to notions such as the infinite and the absolute. Given the preponderance in their work of images relating to the golden age, it is easy to see how the image of the Romantic poet, who longs for plenitude and yearns for mystical transcendent communion, has come to be an established critical truth and, as we have seen, a very persistent one. However, as I have argued, such a reading threatens to overlook a vitally important aspect of Romanticism. Even without the insights or critical terminology of poststructuralism, we can read these ciphers of transcendence – golden age, the infinite, the absolute and related concepts – as explicitly fictional constructs in the works of both Novalis and Schlegel.

Ultimately, then, my direct comparison of a Romantic with a poststructuralist complicates and disturbs what Culler describes as the 'historical scheme that

contrasts romantic with post-romantic literature and sees the latter as a sophisticated or ironical demystification of the excesses and delusions of the former'.<sup>7</sup> Reading Novalis and Derrida together, paying attention to the paradoxes which structure their texts, we can no longer in all rigour subscribe to such a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them'. It is by no means certain that, when placed next to the Romantics, we will always find ourselves and our literary theory in the position of greatest awareness and self-awareness.

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 248.



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## Appendix

### L'aphorisme à contretemps

1. Aphorisme est le nom.
2. Comme son nom l'indique, l'aphorisme sépare, il marque la dissociation (*apo*), il termine, délimite, arrête (*orizô*). Il met fin en séparant, il sépare pour finir – définir.
3. Aphorisme est un nom mais tout nom peut prendre figure d'aphorisme.
4. Un aphorisme expose à contretemps. Il expose le discours – le livre à contretemps. Littéralement – parce qu'il abandonne une parole à sa lettre.  
(Ceci pourrait déjà se lire comme une série d'aphorismes, l'alea d'une première anachronie. Au commencement, il y eut le contretemps. Au commencement, il y a la vitesse. La parole et l'acte sont *pris de vitesse*. L'aphorisme gagne de vitesse.)
5. Abandonner la parole, confier le secret à des lettres, c'est le stratagème du tiers, le médiateur, le Frère, le marieur qui, sans autre désir que le désir des autres, organise le contretemps. Il compte sur des lettres sans compter avec elles:

*In the mean time, against thou shalt awake,  
Shall Romeo by my letters know our drift,  
And hither shall he come...*

6. Malgré les apparences, un aphorisme n'arrive jamais seul, il ne vient pas tout seul. Il appartient à une logique sérielle. Comme dans la pièce de Shakespeare, dans la profondeur en trompe-l'œil de ses paradigmes, tous les *Roméo et Juliette* qui l'ont précédée, il y aura ici plusieurs séries d'aphorismes.
7. Roméo et Juliette, les héros du contretemps dans notre mythologie, les héros positifs. Ils se sont manqués, comme il se sont manqués! Se sont-ils manqués? Mais ils ont aussi survécu, *et tous deux, et l'un à l'autre* survécu, dans leur nom, par un effet savant du contretemps: croisement malheureux, par chance, de séries temporelles et aphoristiques.
8. Par aphorisme, il faut dire que Roméo et Juliette auront, par aphorisme, vécu, et survécu. *Roméo et Juliette* doit tout à l'aphorisme. Celui-ci peut devenir, sans doute, procédé de rhétorique, le calcul retors en vue de la plus grande autorité, une économie ou une stratégie de la maîtrise qui s'entend à potentialiser le sens ('voyez comme je formalise, j'en dis toujours plus qu'il n'y paraît en si peu de mots'). Mais avant de se laisser ainsi manipuler, l'aphorisme nous livre sans défense à l'expérience même du contretemps. Avant tout calcul mais aussi à travers lui, au-delà du calculable même.
9. L'aphorisme ou le discours de la dissociation: chaque phrase, chaque paragraphe se voue à la séparation, il s'enferme, qu'on le veuille ou non, dans la solitude de sa durée propre. Sa rencontre et son contact avec l'autre se livrent toujours à la chance, à ce qui tombe, bien ou mal. Rien n'y est absolument assuré, ni l'enchaînement ni l'ordre. Un aphorisme de la série peut arriver avant ou après

l'autre, avant *et* après l'autre, chacun peut survivre à l'autre – et dans l'autre série. Roméo et Juliette *sont* des aphorismes, et d'abord dans leur nom qu'ils ne sont pas (Juliet. *'Tis but thy name that is my enemy (...)* Romeo. *My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, / Because it is an enemy to thee: / Had I it written, I would tear the word*), car il n'y a pas d'aphorisme sans langage, sans nomination, sans appellation, sans lettre même à déchirer.

10. Chaque aphorisme, comme Roméo et Juliette, chaque série aphoristique a sa durée propre. Sa logique temporelle l'empêche de partager tout son temps avec un autre lieu du discours, avec un autre discours, avec le discours de l'autre. Synchronisation impossible. Je parle ici du discours du temps, de ses marques, de ses dates, du cours du temps et de la digression essentielle qui disloque le temps des désirs, et déporte le pas de ceux qui s'aiment. Mais cela ne suffit pas à caractériser notre aphorisme, il ne suffit pas qu'il y ait dissociation, dislocation, anachronie pour que l'aphorisme ait lieu. Il lui faut encore une forme déterminée, un certain mode. Lequel? Le mauvais aphorisme, le *mauvais* de l'aphorisme est sentencieux, mais tout aphorisme tranche par son caractère de sentence: il dit la vérité dans la forme du jugement dernier, et cette vérité porte la mort. L'arrêt de mort, pour Roméo et Juliette, c'est un contretemps qui les condamne à mort, l'un et l'autre, mais aussi un contretemps qui arrête la mort, en suspend la venue, assure à tous deux le délai nécessaire pour assister et survivre à la mort de l'autre.

11. L'aphorisme: ce qui livre les rendez-vous au hasard. Mais le désir ne s'expose pas à l'aphorisme par hasard. Il n'y a pas de temps pour le désir sans l'aphorisme. Ce dont Roméo et Juliette font l'expérience, c'est l'anachronie exemplaire, l'impossibilité essentielle d'aucune synchronisation absolue. Mais ils vivent, et nous, *en même temps*, ce désordre des séries. Disjonction, dislocation, séparation des lieux, déploiement ou espacement d'une histoire à cause de l'aphorisme, y aurait-il du théâtre sans cela? La survie d'une oeuvre théâtrale suppose que, théâtralement, elle dise quelque chose du théâtre même, de sa possibilité essentielle. Et qu'elle le fasse, théâtralement donc, par le jeu de l'unique et de la répétition, en donnant lieu chaque fois à la chance d'un événement absolument singulier comme à l'idiome intraduisible d'un nom propre, à sa fatalité (l'«ennemi» que «je hais»), à la fatalité d'une date et d'un rendez-vous. Les dates, les calendriers, les cadastres, les toponymies, tous les codes que nous jetons sur le temps et l'espace comme des filets pour réduire ou maîtriser les différences, pour les arrêter, les déterminer, ce sont aussi des pièges contretemps. Destinés à éviter les contretemps, à accorder nos rythmes en les pliant à la mesure objective, ils produisent le malentendu, accumulent les occasions de faux pas ou de fausses manoeuvres, révèlent et accroissent à la fois cette anachronie des désirs: *dans le même temps*. Quel est ce temps? Il n'y a pas de place pour une question dans l'aphorisme.

12. Roméo et Juliette, la conjonction de deux désirs aphoristiques mais tenus ensemble, maintenus dans le maintenant disloqué d'un amour ou d'une promesse. D'une promesse dans leur nom, mais à travers et au-delà de leur nom donné, la promesse d'un *autre nom*, sa demande plutôt: *'O be some other name...'* Le *et* de cette conjonction, le théâtre de ce 'et', on l'a souvent présenté, représenté comme la scène du contretemps fortuit, de l'anachronie aléatoire: le rendez-vous manqué, l'accident malheureux, la lettre qui n'arrive pas à destination, le temps du détour prolongé pour une *purloined letter*, le remède qui se transforme en poison quand le stratagème d'un tiers, d'un frère, le Frère Laurence, propose à la fois le remède et la lettre (*And if thou dar'st, I'll give thee remedy... (...)* *In the mean time, against thou shalt awake, / Shall Romeo by my letters know our drift, / And hither*

*shall he come...*). Cette représentation n'est pas fausse. Mais si ce drame s'est ainsi imprimé, surimprimé dans la mémoire de l'Europe, texte par-dessus texte, c'est que l'accident anachronique vient illustrer une impossibilité essentielle. Il déconcerte une logique philosophique, celle qui voudrait que les accidents restent ce qu'ils sont, accidentels. Cette logique, du même coup, rejette dans l'impensable une anachronie de structure, l'interruption absolue de l'histoire en tant que déploiement d'une temporalité, d'une temporalité une et organisée. Ce qui arrive à Roméo et Juliette n'a pas rencontré par hasard le poison, le contretemps ou le détour de la lettre. Pour que cette rencontre ait lieu, il fallait avoir déjà institué un système de marques (les noms, les heures, les cartes des lieux, les dates et les toponymies dites 'objectives') pour contrecarrer, si on peut dire, la dispersion des durées intérieures et hétérogènes, pour cadrer, organiser, mettre de l'ordre, rendre possible un rendez-vous: autrement dit pour dénier, en en prenant acte, la non-coïncidence, la séparation des monades, la distance infinie, la déconnexion des expériences, la multiplicité des mondes, tout ce qui rend possible un contretemps ou le détour irrémédiable d'une lettre. Mais le désir de Roméo et Juliette est né au coeur de cette possibilité. Il n'y aurait pas eu d'amour, le serment n'aurait pas eu lieu, ni le temps, ni son théâtre sans la discordance. Le contretemps accidentel vient *remarquer* le contretemps essentiel. Autant dire qu'il n'est pas accidentel. Il n'a pas, pour autant, la signification d'une essence ou d'une structure formelle. Ce n'est pas la condition de possibilité abstraite, une forme universelle du rapport à l'autre en général, une dialectique du désir ou des consciences. Plutôt la singularité d'une imminence dont la 'point acérée' aiguillonne le désir à sa naissance – la naissance même du désir. J'aime parce que l'autre est l'autre, parce que son temps ne sera jamais le mien. La durée vivante, la présence même de son amour reste infiniment éloignée de la mienne, éloignée d'elle même dans ce qui la tend vers la mienne, et cela jusque dans ce que l'on voudrait décrire comme l'euphorie amoureuse, la communion extatique, l'intuition mystique. Je ne peux aimer l'autre que dans la passion de cet aphorisme. Celui-ci n'advient pas, il ne survient pas comme le malheur, la malchance ou la négativité. Il a la forme de l'affirmation la plus aimante – il est la chance du désir. Et il ne coupe pas seulement dans l'étoffe des durées, il espace. Le contretemps dit quelque chose de la topologie ou du visible, il ouvre le théâtre.

13. Inversement, pas de contretemps, pas d'aphorisme sans la promesse d'un maintenant commun, sans le serment, le vœu de synchronie, le partage désiré d'un présent vivant. Pour que le partage soit désiré, ne doit-il pas être d'abord donné, entrevu, appréhendé? Mais le partage, c'est justement un autre nom de l'aphorisme.
14. Cette série aphoristique en croise une autre. Parce qu'il trace, l'aphorisme *survit*, il vit plus longtemps que son présent et il vit plus que la vie. Arrêt de mort. Il donne et porte la mort, mais pour en décider ainsi d'un arrêt, il la suspend, il l'arrête encore.
15. Il n'y aurait pas le contretemps, ni l'anachronie, si la séparation entre les monades disjoignait seulement des intriorités. Le contretemps se produit à l'intersection entre l'expérience intérieure (la 'phenomenologie de la conscience intime du temps' ou de l'espace) et ses marques chronologiques ou topographiques, celles qu'on dit 'objectives', 'dans le monde'. Il n'y aurait pas de séries autrement, sans la possibilité de cet espacement marqué, avec ses conventions sociales et l'histoire de ses codes, avec ses fictions et ses simulacres, avec ses dates. Avec les noms dits propres.

16. Le simulacre lève le rideau, il révèle, grâce à la dissociation des séries, le théâtre de l'impossible: deux êtres se survivent tous deux l'un à l'autre. Le certitude absolue qui règne sur le *duel* (*Roméo et Juliette* est la mise en scène de tous les duels), c'est que l'un doit mourir avant l'autre. L'un doit voir mourir l'autre. À n'importe qui je dois pouvoir dire: puisque nous sommes deux, nous savons de façon absolument inéluctable que l'un de nous mourra avant l'autre. L'un de nous verra l'autre mourir, l'un de nous survivra, ne fût-ce qu'un instant. L'un de nous, l'un de nous, l'un de nous seulement, portera la mort de l'autre – et son deuil. Il est impossible que nous survivions tous deux l'un à l'autre. Voilà le duel, l'axiomatique de tout duel, la scène la plus commune et la moins dite – ou la plus interdite – de notre rapport à l'autre. Or *l'impossible a lieu*, non pas dans la 'réalité-objective' qui n'a pas ici la parole, mais dans l'expérience de Roméo et Juliette. Et sous la loi du serment, celle qui préside à toute parole donnée. Ils vivent *tour à tour* la mort de l'autre, pendant un temps, le contretemps de leur mort. Ils portent tous deux le deuil – et veillent tous deux sur la mort de l'autre. Double arrêt de mort. Roméo meurt avant Juliette qu'il a vu morte. Ils vivent, survivent tous deux la mort de l'autre.

17. L'impossible – ce théâtre de la double survie – dit aussi, comme tout aphorisme, la vérité. Dès le serment qui lie deux désirs, chacun porte déjà le deuil de l'autre, lui confie sa mort aussi: si tu meurs avant moi, je te garderai, si je meurs avant toi, tu me porteras en toi, l'un gardera l'autre, l'aura déjà gardé depuis la première déclaration. Cette double intériorisation ne serait possible ni dans l'intériorité monadique ni dans la logique de l'espace ou du temps 'objectifs'. Elle a pourtant lieu chaque fois que j'aime. Tout alors commence par cette survie. Chaque fois que j'aime ou chaque fois que je hais, chaque fois qu'une loi m'*engage* envers la mort de l'autre. Et c'est la même, la même double loi. Un game peut toujours s'inverser qui garde la mort.

18. Telle série d'aphorismes en croise une autre, la même sous d'autres noms, sous le nom du nom. Roméo et Juliette s'aiment à travers leur nom, malgré leur nom, ils meurent à cause de leur nom, ils survivent dans leur nom. Puisqu'il n'y a ni désir ni serment ni lien sacré (*sacramentum*) sans la séparation aphoristique, le plus grand amour naît de la plus grande force de dissociation, celle qui oppose et divise les deux familles en leur nom. Roméo et Juliette portent ces noms. Ils les portent, les supportent même s'ils ne veulent pas les assumer. De ce nom qui les sépare, mais qui aura du même coup tendu leur désir de toute sa force aphoristique, ils voudraient se séparer. Mais la déclaration la plus vibrante de leur amour appelle encore le nom qu'elle dénonce. On pourrait être tenté de distinguer ici, autre aphorisme, entre le prénom propre et le nom de famille qui ne serait nom propre que dans l'élément de la généralité ou de la classification généalogique. On pourrait être tenté de distinguer Roméo de Montaigu et Juliette de Capulet. Peut-être sont-ils, l'un et l'autre, tentés de le faire. Mais ils ne le font pas, et on doit remarquer que dans la dénonciation du nome (acte II, scène 2), ils s'en prennent aussi à leur prénom, du moins à celui de Roméo, qui semble faire partie du nom de famille. Le prénom porte encore le nom du père, il rappelle la loi de la généalogie. Roméo *lui-même*, le porteur du nom n'est pas le nom, c'est *Roméo*, le nom qu'il porte. Et faut-il appeler le porteur par le nom qu'il porte? Elle l'appelle pour lui dire: je t'aime, délivre-nous de ton nom, Roméo, ne le porte plus, Roméo, le nom de Roméo:

*JULIET.*

*O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo  
Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;  
Or, if you will not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.*

Elle parle alors dans la nuit et rien ne l'assure qu'elle s'adresse à Roméo lui-même, présent en personne. Pour demander à Roméo de refuser son nom, elle ne peut, en son absence, que s'adresser à son nom ou à son ombre. Roméo – lui-même – est dans l'ombre et il se demande s'il est temps de la prendre au mot ou s'il doit encore attendre. La prendre au mot, ce sera s'engager à se déprendre de son nom, un peu plus tard. Pour l'instant, il décide d'attendre et d'écouter encore:

ROMEO (*aside*).

*Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?*

JULIET.

*'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague  
What's a Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O! be some other name.  
What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;  
And for that name, which is no part of thee,  
Take all myself.*

ROMEO.

*I take thee at thy word.  
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd  
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.*

JULIET.

*What man art thou, that, thus bescreen'd in night;  
So stumblest on my counsel?*

ROMEO.

*By a name  
I know not how to tell thee who I am:  
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,  
Because it is an enemy to thee:  
Had I it written, I would tear the word.*

JULIET.

*My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words  
Of that tongue's uttering, yet I know the sound:  
Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?*

ROMEO.

*Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike.*

19. Quand elle s'adresse à Roméo dans la nuit, quand elle lui demande 'Ô Roméo! pourquoi es-tu Roméo? Renie ton père et refuse ton nom', elle semble s'adresser à lui, lui-même, à Roméo porteur du nom Roméo, à celui qui n'est pas Roméo puisqu'il lui est demandé de renier son père et son nom. Elle semble donc l'appeler au-delà



de son nom. Or il n'est pas présent, elle n'est sûre qu'il soit là, *lui-même*, au-delà de son nom, c'est la nuit et cette nuit abrite l'indistinction entre le nom et le porteur du nom. C'est dans son nom qu'elle l'appelle encore, et qu'elle l'appelle à ne plus s'appeler Roméo, et qu'elle lui demande, à lui Roméo, de renier son nom. Mais c'est, quoi qu'elle dise ou dénie, lui qu'elle aime. Qui, lui? Roméo. Celui qui s'appelle Roméo, le porteur du nom, qui s'appelle Roméo bien qu'il ne soit seulement celui qui porte ce nom et bien qu'il existe, sans être visible ou présent dans la nuit, hors de son nom.

20. La nuit. Tout ce qui se passe la nuit, pour Roméo et Juliette, se décide plutôt dans la pénombre, entre la nuit et le jour. L'indécision entre Roméo et le porteur de ce nom, entre 'Roméo', le nom de Roméo et Roméo lui-même. Théâtre c'est, dit-on, la visibilité, la scène. Ce théâtre-ci appartient à la nuit parce qu'il met en scène ce qui ne se voit pas, le nom; il met en scène ce qu'on appelle parce qu'on ne voit pas ou n'est pas assuré de voir ce qu'on appelle. Théâtre du nom, théâtre de nuit. Le nom appelle au-delà de la présence, du phénomène, de la lumière, au-delà du jour, au-delà du théâtre. Il garde, d'où le deuil et la survie, ce qui n'est plus présent, l'invisible: ce qui désormais ne verra plus le jour.

21. Elle veut la mort de Roméo. Elle l'aura. La mort de son nom (*'Tis but thy name that is my enemy*), certes, la mort de 'Roméo', mais ils ne pourront pas se déprendre de leur nom, ils le savent sans le savoir. Elle déclare la guerre à 'Roméo', à son nom, en son nom, elle ne gagnera cette guerre qu'à la mort de Roméo, lui-même. Lui-même? Qui? Roméo. Mais 'Roméo' n'est pas Roméo. Justement. Elle veut la mort de 'Roméo'. Roméo meurt. 'Roméo' survit. Elle le garde mort dans son nom. Qui? Juliette, Roméo.

22. L'aphorisme: la séparation dans le langage, et en lui par le nom qui ferme l'horizon. L'aphorisme est à la fois nécessaire et impossible. Roméo est radicalement séparé de son nom. Lui, lui-même vivant, désir vivant et singulier, il n'est pas 'Roméo'; mais la séparation, l'aphorisme du nom reste impossible. Il meurt sans son nom mais il meurt aussi parce qu'il n'a pu se délivrer de son nom, ou de son père, encore moins le renier, répondre à la demande de Juliette (*Deny thy father, and refuse thy name*).

23. Quand elle lui dit: mon ennemi, c'est seulement ton nom, elle ne pense pas 'mon' ennemi. Elle-même, Juliette, elle n'a rien contre le nom de Roméo. C'est le nom qu'elle porte (Juliette et Capulet) qui se trouve en guerre avec le nom de Roméo. La guerre a lieu entre les noms. Et quand elle dit cela, elle n'est pas sûre, dans la nuit, d'atteindre Roméo lui-même. Elle lui parle, elle le suppose distinct de son nom puisqu'elle s'adresse à lui pour lui dire: 'Tu es toi-même, non un Montaigu.' Mais il n'est pas là. Du moins ne peut-elle s'assurer de sa présence. C'est en elle, en son for intérieur, que dans la nuit elle s'adresse à lui, mais encore à lui dans son nom, et dans la forme la plus exclamative de l'apostrophe: *O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?* Elle de lui dit pas: pourquoi t'appelles-tu Roméo, pourquoi portes-tu ce nom (comme un vêtement, un ornement, un signe détachable)? Elle lui dit: pourquoi *es-tu* Roméo? Elle le sait: si détachable et si dissociable, si aphoristique soit-il, son nom est son essence. Inséparable de son être. Et en lui demandant de se départir de son nom, elle lui demande sans doute de vivre enfin, et de vivre son amour (car pour vivre vraiment soi-même, il faut échapper à la loi du nom, à la loi familiale faite pour la survie et me rappelant sans cesse à la mort) mais elle lui demande *aussi bien* de mourir, car sa vie *est* son nom. Il existe dans son nom: *wherefore art thou Romeo? O Romeo, Romeo!* Roméo est Roméo, et Roméo n'est pas Roméo. Il n'est lui-même qu'à se départir de son nom, il n'est lui-même que dans son nom. Roméo ne peut s'appeler lui-même que s'il départit de son nom, il ne s'appelle qu'à *partir* de son nom. Arrêt de mort et de survie: deux fois plutôt qu'une.

24. Parlant à celui qu'elle aime en elle et hors d'elle, dans la pénombre, Juliette murmure la plus implacable analyse du nom. Du nom et du nom propre. Implacable: elle dit la sentence, l'arrêt de mort, la vérité fatale du nom. Impitoyablement elle analyse, élément par élément. Qu'est-ce que Montaigu? Rien de toi, tu es toi-même et non Montaigu, lui dit-elle. Non seulement ce nom ne dit rien de toi en totalité mais il ne dit rien, il ne nomme même pas une partie de toi, ni la main, ni le pied, ni le bras, ni le visage, rien qui soit humain! Cette analyse est implacable car elle annonce ou dénonce l'inhumanité ou l'anhumanité du nom. Un nom propre ne nomme rien qui soit humain, qui appartienne à un corps humain, une âme humaine, une essence de l'homme. Et pourtant ce rapport à l'inhumain d'advient qu'à l'homme, pour lui, chez lui, au nom de l'homme. Seul il se donne ce nom inhumain. Et Roméo ne serait pas ce qu'il est, étranger à son nom, sans ce nom. Juliette poursuit alors son analyse: le nom des choses n'appartient pas plus aux choses que le nom des hommes n'appartient aux hommes, et pourtant il en est autrement séparable. Exemple de la rose, une fois de plus. Une rose reste ce qu'elle est sans son nom, Roméo n'est plus ce qu'il est sans son nom. Mais Juliette fait comme si, pour un temps, Roméo pouvait ne rien perdre en perdant son nom: comme la rose. Sois comme une rose, lui dit-elle en somme, et sans généalogie, 'sans pourquoi'. (À supposer que la rose, toutes les roses de la pensée, de la littérature, de la mystique, cette 'formidable anthologie', absente de tout bouquet...)

25. Elle ne lui demande pas de perdre tout nom, seulement de changer de nom: *O! be some other name*. Mais cela peut vouloir dire deux choses: prends un autre nom propre (un nom humain, cette chose inhumaine qui n'appartient qu'à l'homme); *ou bien*: prends une autre sorte de nom, un nom qui ne soit pas un nom d'homme, prends donc un nom de chose, un nom commun qui, comme le nom de la rose, n'ait pas cette inhumanité qui consiste à affecter l'être même de qui le porte alors qu'il ne nomme rien de lui. Et après les deux points, c'est la question:

*O! be some other name.  
What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title.*

26. Le nom ne serait qu'un 'titre', et le titre n'est pas la chose qu'il nomme, pas plus qu'un titre de noblesse ne prend part à cela même, la famille, l'oeuvre, à qui on le dit appartenir. *Roméo et Juliette* reste aussi le titre – survivant – de toute une famille de pièces de théâtre. Ce qui se passe dans ces pièces, nous devons le dire aussi des pièces, de leur généalogie, de leur idiome, de leur singularité, de leur survie.

27. Juliette propose à Roméo un marché infini, le contrat en apparence le plus dissymétrique: tu peux tout gagner sans rien perdre, question de nom. En renonçant à ton nom, tu ne renonces à rien, rien de toi, de toi-même, ni rien d'humain. En échange, et sans avoir rien perdu, tu me gagnes, et non seulement une partie de moi, mais moi toute entière: *Romeo, doff thy name; / And for that name, which is no part of thee, / Take all myself*. Il aura tout gagné, il aura tout perdu: le nom et la vie, et Juliette.

28. Le cercle de tous ces noms en *o*: *words, Romeo, rose, love*. Il a accepté le marché, il la *prend au mot* (*I take thee at thy word*) au moment où elle lui propose de la *prendre* toute entière (*Take all myself*). Jeu de l'idiome: en te prenant au mot, en relevant le défi, en acceptant cet échange incroyable, impayable, je te prends toute entière.



Et contre rien, contre un mot, mon nom, qui n'est rien, rien d'humain, rien de moi, sinon rien pour moi. Je ne donne rien en te prenant au mot, je n'abandonne rien et te prends tout entière. En vérité, et ils connaissent tous deux la vérité de l'aphorisme, il perdra tout. Ils perdront tout dans cette aporie, cette double aporie du nom propre. Et pour avoir accepté d'échanger le nom propre de Roméo contre un nom commun: non pas celui de *rose*, mais celui de *love*. Car Roméo ne renonce pas à tout nom, seulement au nom de son père, c'est-à-dire à son nom propre, si on peut encore dire: *I take thee at thy word./ Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd, / Henceforth I never will be Romeo*. Il se gagne et se perd à la fois dans le nom commun, mais aussi dans la loi commune de l'amour: *Call me love*. Appelle-moi ton amour.

29. La dissymétrie reste infinie. Elle tient encore à ceci: Roméo ne lui adresse pas la même demande. Il ne demande pas à celle qui sera secrètement sa femme de renoncer à son nom ou de renier son père. Comme si cela allait de soi et n'appelait pas un tel *déchirement* (il parlera dans un instant de déchirer son nom, l'écriture ou la lettre de son nom, si du moins il l'avait écrit lui-même, ce qui est par principe exclu, justement, originairement). Paradoxe, ironie, renversement de la loi commune? Ou répétition qui confirme au contraire la vérité de cette loi? D'habitude, dans nos cultures, le mari garde son nom, celui de son père, et la femme renonce au sien. Quand le mari donne son nom à sa femme, ce n'est pas, comme ici, pour le perdre, ou pour en changer, c'est pour l'imposer en le gardant. Ici elle lui demande de renier son père et de changer de nom. Mais cette inversion confirme la loi: le nom du père devrait être gardé par le fils, c'est à lui qu'il y a quelque sens à l'arracher, nullement à la fille qui n'en a jamais reçu la garde. Terrible lucidité de Juliette. Elle connaît les deux liens de la loi, le *double bind* qui lie un fils au nom de son père. Il ne peut vivre que s'il s'affirme singulièrement, sans le nom d'héritage. Mais l'écriture de ce nom, qu'il n'a pas écrit lui-même (*Had I it written, I would tear the word*), le constitue dans son être même, sans rien nommer de lui, et il ne peut que s'anéantir en le déniait. Il peut tout au plus, en somme, le dénier, le renier, il ne peut l'effacer ni le déchirer. Il est donc perdu de toute façon et elle le sait. Et le sait parce qu'elle l'aime et elle l'aime parce qu'elle le sait. Et elle lui demande sa mort en lui demandant de garder sa vie parce qu'elle l'aime, parce qu'elle sait, et parce qu'elle sait que la mort ne lui arrivera pas par accident. Il y est voué, et elle avec lui, par la double loi du nom.

30. Il n'y aurait pas de contretemps sans la double loi du nom. Le contretemps suppose cette inadéquation inhumaine, trop humaine, qui toujours disloque un nom propre. Le mariage secret, le serment (*sacramentum*), la double survie qu'il engage, son anachronie constitutive, tout cela obéit à la même loi. Cette loi, la loi du contretemps, est double puisqu'elle est divisée; elle porte l'aphorisme en elle-même, comme sa vérité. L'aphorisme, c'est la loi.

31. Même s'il le voulait, Roméo ne pourrait pas renoncer *de lui-même* à son nom et à son père. Il ne peut pas le vouloir de lui-même, alors que pourtant cette émancipation lui est présentée comme la chance d'être enfin lui-même, de *s'inventer au-delà du nom* – la chance de vivre enfin, car il porte le nom comme sa mort. Il ne peut pas le vouloir lui-même, de lui-même, car *il n'est pas sans* son nom. Il ne peut le désirer que depuis l'appel de l'autre, et *s'inventer au nom de l'autre*. Il ne hait d'ailleurs son nom qu'à partir du moment où Juliette le lui demande, si on peut dire:

*My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,  
Because it is an enemy to thee:  
Had I it written, I would tear the word.*

32. Quand elle croit le reconnaître dans la pénombre, au clair de lune, le drame du nom est consommé (Juliet. *My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words / Of that tongue's uttering, yet I know the sound: / Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?* Romeo. *Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike.*) Elle le reconnaît et l'appelle de son nom (N'es-tu pas Roméo et un Montaigu?), elle l'identifie d'une part au timbre de sa voix, soit aux mots qu'elle entend sans image, d'autre part au moment où il a, obéissant à l'injonction, renié son nom et son père. La survie et la mort sont à l'oeuvre, autrement dit la lune. Mais ce pouvoir de mort qui paraît au clair de lune, il s'appelle Juliette, et le soleil qu'elle vient à figurer tout à coup porte la vie et la mort au nom du père. Elle tue la lune. Que dit Roméo à l'ouverture de la scène (qui n'est pas une scène puisque le nom la voue à l'invisibilité, mais qui est un théâtre puisque la lumière y est artificielle et figurée)? *But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun! / Arise fair sun, and kill the envious moon, / Who is already sick and pale with grief...*

33. La face lunaire de cette pièce d'ombre, une certaine froideur de *Roméo et Juliette*. Tout n'y est pas de glace, ni de miroir, mais la glace n'y vient pas seulement de la mort, du marbre auquel tout paraît voué (*the tomb, the monument, the grave, the flowers on the lady's grave*), dans ce destin de gisants qui enlace et sépare, dès leur nom, ces deux amants. Non, la froideur qui gagne peu à peu le corps de la pièce et comme d'avance la cadavérisation, c'est peut-être l'ironie, la figure ou la rhétorique de l'ironie, le contretemps de la conscience ironique. Celle-ci se disproportionne toujours entre le fini et l'infini, elle joue de l'inadéquation, de l'aphorisme, elle *spécule*, elle analyse, elle analyse, elle analyse la loi de désidentification, l'implacable nécessité, la machine du nom propre qui m'oblige à vivre cela même, à savoir mon nom, dont je meurs.

34. Ironie du nom propre, telle qu'elle est analysée par Juliette. Sentence de vérité qui porte la mort, l'aphorisme sépare, et d'abord me sépare de mon nom. Je ne suis pas mon nom. Autant dire que je pourrais lui survivre. Mais d'abord il est destiné à me survivre. Il m'annonce ainsi la mort. Non-coïncidence et contretemps entre mon nom et moi, entre l'expérience selon laquelle je m'appelle ou m'entends appeler et mon 'présent vivant'. Rendez-vous avec mon nom. *Untimely*, intempestif, au mauvais moment.

35. Changer de nom: le bal, la substitution, les masques, le simulacre, le rendez-vous avec la mort. *Untimely. Never on time.*

36. Ce qui se dit ironiquement, c'est-à-dire au sens rhétorique de la figure ironique: faire entendre le contraire de ce qu'on dit. Ici, l'impossible, donc: 1) deux amants se survivent tous deux, l'un à l'autre, chacun voyant mourir l'autre; 2) le nom les constitue sans être riens d'eux-mêmes, les condamnent à être ce qu'ils ne sont pas sous le masque, à se confondre avec le masque; 3) les deux sont unis par cela même qui les sépare, etc. Et voilà ce qu'ils énoncent clairement, le formalisent même comme une spéculation philosophique ne l'aurait pas osé. Une veine, par la pointe aiguë de cette analyse, reçoit la potion distillée. Elle n'attend pas, elle ne donne pas le temps, pas même celui du théâtre, elle vient aussitôt glacer le coeur de leurs serments. Cette potion serait le vrai poison, la vérité empoisonnée de ce théâtre.

37. Ironie de l'aphorisme. Dans l'*Esthétique*, Hegel se moque de ceux qui, prompts à encenser les ironistes, ne se montrent même pas capables d'analyser l'ironie analytique de *Roméo et Juliette*. Il vise alors Tieck: 'Mais quant on croit que se trouve ici la meilleure occasion de montrer ce qu'est l'ironie, par exemple dans *Roméo et Juliette*, on est déçu, car d'ironie il n'est plus question.'

38. Autre série, elle vient recouper toutes les autres: le nom, la loi, la généalogie, la double survie, le contretemps, bref l'aphorisme de *Roméo et Juliette*. Non pas de Roméo et Juliette mais de *Roméo et Juliette*, la pièce de Shakespeare ainsi intitulée. Elle appartient à une série, au palimpseste encore vivant, au théâtre ouvert des récits qui portent ce nom. Elle leur survit, mais grâce à elle ils survivent. Telle double survie aurait-elle été possible '*without that title*', comme disait Juliette? Et les noms de Matteo Bandello, de Luigi da Porto survivraient-ils sans celui de Shakespeare qui leur survécut? Et sans les innombrables répétitions sous le même nom singulièrement gagées? Sans les greffes de noms? Et d'autre pièces? *O! be some other name...*

39. L'aphorisme absolu: un nom propre. Sans généalogie, sans la moindre copule. Fin du théâtre. Rideau. Tableau (*Les deux amants unis dans la mort* d'Angelo dall'Oca Bianca). Tourisme, soleil de décembre à Vérone (*Verona by that name is known*). Un vrai soleil, l'autre (*The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*, pp. 519-33. First version published in *Roméo et Juliette* (Paris: Papiers, 1986 (on the occasion of a production in Paris of *Romeo and Juliet* by Daniel Mesguich.))